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THE GUESTS STOOD UP TO WITNESS THE RESULTS OF THE DISASTER

MRS. GALER'S BUSINESS

BY

W. PETT RIDGE

WITH FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. H. BUCKLAND

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MRS. GALER'S BUSINESS

CHAPTER I

'MOTHER! Kin I come out now?'

'You stay in the corner, me lord, until you can promise to be a better boy.'

Mrs. Galer at the corner doorway, taking a few moments of the evening air after steaming warm hours of work, answered her son with an affectation of severity, and talked to Miss Jeffrey on the subjects of fashion and love. Other women in Kimmer Street were also holding or attending receptions; these had acquired a trick of getting comfortable support out of a door-post, a feat Mrs. Galer had never attempted to practise; fair to mention that Kimmer Street had a certain etiquette not affecting streets of less refinement, and no lady cared to be seen talking at a doorway until evening. Here lived the aristocracy of the neighbourhood; every window had curtains, and if a pane became broken it was replaced by glass; tables stood in good view with special treasures exhibited, and photograph frames glaring at the street. Behind Mrs. Galer shaded oil-lamps hung from the ceiling of the shop, and long festoons of white garments stretched from wall to wall; three muscular girls, bare-armed to

above the elbow, worked with flat irons, straightening themselves now and again to exchange these and to give their back hair a twist; when they talked too noisily Mrs. Galer, at the doorway, looked over her shoulder, and the voices lowered at once. Above the white-painted lower half of the windows, with peep-holes scraped by Mrs. Galer's young women when they desired to see something of the world, hung a warning notice, 'Not responsible for linen after three months.' A poster board of the Grand, Islington, chained to the railings as though it were a desperate, untrained animal, announced the appearance of Mr. Irving in *The Bells*.

'You have to take your chance,' went on Mrs. Galer briskly, looking up at her companion. 'Some have good luck with their 'usbands and some don't. It's all according to what fate has mapped out for you. And if you think yourself hard done by——'

The dressmaker from next door gave a sigh that was almost a groan, and shook her head.

'Why, then what you've got to do is not to pity yourself but to find out some one worse off and pity her.'

'One in Abney Park,' said Miss Jeffrey, checking the numbers with the dark pricked finger of her right hand; 'one in Finchley, another in——'

'You've told me,' interrupted Mrs. Galer, 'more than once. And you make it a grievance that nobody's ever married you. Now, I ask you candidly, would you care to 'ave such a 'usband as mine?'

To tell the truth,' replied Miss Jeffrey, with

THREE MUSCULAR GIRLS, BARE ARMED TO ABOVE THE ELBOW, WORKED WITH FLAT IRONS

equal frankness, 'I wouldn't. And then again there's your boy.'

'He's a 'andful,' said Mrs. Galer, with a mixture of pride and regret in her voice.

'The proper way to bring up children——' began the maiden lady.

The prisoner in the back room repeated his appeal, adding now a promise of reform. His mother gave the word of permission; sound came of the boy clattering through the passage and out of the front door.

'Wonder what time my fine gentleman will blunder 'ome to-night? Last night it was before 'alf-past twelve. I couldn't make it out at all.'

'Was he——?'

'Yes,' she replied casually. 'But I will say this for Galer, that he seldom, if ever, forgets he was once a gentleman—I mean, a gentleman's servant.'

'There's a running tale in one of the Sunday papers,' said Miss Jeffrey, 'where one of the young ladies of the family falls head over heels in love with the groom, and lo and behold——!'

The eldest of the three bare-armed girls in the laundry was making attempts to recover an elusive song which she had heard the previous night; she seemed discouraged by failure, but the other two urged Milly to have another shy at it, and Mrs. Galer, listening to Miss Jeffrey's recital of a somewhat complicated plot—that necessitated now and again a retracing of steps with a 'Oh, but I forgot to tell you,' and a 'But before this you must know,' Miss Jeffrey excusing herself on the grounds that

she had to follow at the present time the sinuous course of eight serial stories—Mrs. Galer found herself nodding to the rhythm of the refrain. The girls, anxious to perfect themselves in knowledge of the tune, chanted the air in a lugubrious manner.

'You're a nice cheerful set,' remarked Mrs. Galer, having dismissed her neighbour. 'Why don't you indulge in something lively when you open your face? Enough to give anybody the blues. Milly,' she went on, 'give me a fresh iron, and let me show you how to have larks with a shirt front. You're too lackadaisical in your treatment of 'em.'

'I shall get 'ome to by-bye early,' said the head girl, stretching her arms. 'Feel jest about tired.'

'Who took you to the Cambridge last night?'

'Forget his name,' replied Milly in a casual way. 'He's got a name, but I've clean forgot it. Fair chap, with a 'igh voice.'

'And short-sighted?' asked one of the other girls. Milly threw something damp at the inquirer; Mrs. Galer ordered them to behave; Milly retorted that she could behave herself as well as any so long as people who never found themselves asked out managed to keep a civil tongue. Mrs. Galer soothed them by pointing out errors in the conduct of each, and sketched a vague proposal of emptying a pail of water over both.

'Can your Sid come out and play?' asked a boy at the doorway. The boy showed his head only, prepared apparently to dodge, if circumstances suggested this movement.

'He's not in,' replied Mrs. Galer, ironing with

increase of determination, 'and if he was, he shouldn't. I won't have him mix up with you Bowling Green Lane lot.'

'So offly sorry,' retorted the boy, in affected tones. 'Give him my cawd, will you, and say I called.'

'You be off,' ordered the girl Milly. 'Sling your 'ook, Johnnie Leadbetter, soon as ever you like.'

'Only waiting for my keb,' said the boy. 'Dem fellow's always late. Shan't pay him his full fare if he isn't careful. Doing anything this evening, my love?'

'I 'll let you know what I 'm doing,' threatened the girl, 'in about 'alf a tick.'

'If you see my Sid,' called out Mrs. Galer ('Don't touch the boy, Milly, it's only his way), if you see my Sid, you tell him to come in like a shot.'

'He wasn't at school yesterday,' shouted the boy, firing his last shots before leaving, 'old Bismarck's resigned, and your 'usband's dancing outside the new parcel post office in Farringdon Road.'

Johnnie Leadbetter, with a triumphant whistle, delivered by the fortunate absence of one tooth, went, pulling the four brass knobs of Miss Jeffrey's house and snatching at the Virginian creeper.

'He's a bad nut, I 'm afraid.'

'Meaning your boy, Mrs. Galer?'

'*My* boy's all right,' she replied quickly. 'He's going to be a comfort to me when he grows out of his little faults. It's my 'usband I 'm thinking of. When you come to ponder over it,' Mrs. Galer laughed, 'it's a rare bit of luck to be only my age

last birthday, and to be tacked on to a man like that for all the rest of your life.'

'Couple of customers in this morning whilst you were making the beds upstairs was saying they never remember any one quite so funny as him, when he's had a drop.'

'He used to make me laugh,' admitted Mrs. Galer thoughtfully, 'at first. I s'pose it grew a bit monotonous. Saturday nights I could have understood it, because the next day's Sunday, and p'r'aps on Mondays a little extra might be excused; but when it comes to every blessed day in the week——'

'He'll drink himself to death in course of time,' said one of the girls encouragingly.

'Never lifts a 'and to strike you, though, does he, Mrs. Galer?'

'Too much like hard work,' she replied. 'Besides, I should stop his allowance if he did. No,' she said, after a period of hard ironing, 'I made a mistake and I've got to put up with it. No use grumbling. Just as well to pretend you're 'appy even if you ain't. Can you girls look after yourselves whilst I go in the back room of the house and see about supper?'

'I'll keep an eye awake,' said Milly. 'Leave the door of the passage open, Mrs. Galer, so that we can smell the cooking.'

'Catch!' she cried youthfully.

One of the girls fielded the rolled-up apron, and as Mrs. Galer went through the doorway they immediately raised voices. These were the signs of

respect which the girls paid to her; the temporary relinquishment of extravagant phrases in her presence, and a slight modulation in tone. There were other laundries in Clerkenwell where the presence of the owner put no break on conversation; Mrs. Galer's first bylaw communicated to a new girl was 'No language!' and even the useless, hopeless Mr. Galer had trained himself to regard this idiosyncrasy; in falling upstairs, or in the disappointment that came after anticipating a non-existent step, he would permit himself to use only an exclamation of the mildest nature. Mrs. Galer attributed her strict views in this regard to the fact that one evening, when quite a girl, she had gone into a chapel for an hour. It was raining at the time.

The girls before leaving called through the passage that there appeared to be a fire in King's Cross Road; would Mrs. Galer mind turning out the gas and seeing to the door; they all desired to go and have a look before the fun ended. From the street came the clatter of youngsters' footsteps, the sound of their shrill tones urging each other to increased speed. Her boy Sid would, for certain, be one of the first to put aside all engagements and race to the scene of action; she would rather he had been safe at home, but there was the advantage that on the boy's return he would give her a detailed account of everything he had seen. Sharp boy, Sid; if only he could be induced to give attention to his school that he gave to things which did not matter!

'But so long as he doesn't grow up a loafer,' said Mrs. Galer to a frame on the mantelpiece, 'I don't mind.'

The portrait was becoming faded, and one had to hold it near to the light in order to appreciate details. Nine years ago; nine years ago come to-morrow Galer had driven her out in his hansom-cab, the day after the wedding, she leaning over the splash-boards for all the world as a regular fare would have done, and on Pentonville Hill he had shouted through the trap-door, 'Let 's 'ave our photos took!' They pulled up and alighted, to be received by a most amiable gentleman wearing a smoking cap, and possessing a husky voice and a tearful eye, who immediately gave his word, as an artist, that if they left it to him they should be furnished with a photograph like life, only a jolly sight better; in the argument at the studio concerning the relative advantages of a background of sea as compared with those of a rustic stile, she remembered that she had her own way. Galer (never a man who worshipped hard work) had taken the rest of the day off on the grounds that it seemed only right and proper to mark the occasion in some special manner. Later, he found his best excuse for not taking the cab out in the state of the weather, which was sometimes too warm, sometimes too cold, sometimes too wet, sometimes too fine, until at last the atmospheric conditions considered necessary for the perfect performance of his duties ceased to appear.

'That you, Mr. Leadbetter?'

The street door went to with a slam; a shuffling walk; an elderly groan in the taking off of an overcoat answered Mrs. Galer's inquiry. A hand felt over the door for the handle, and Mrs. Galer ran to open it.

'You're slow for a youngster,' she cried rallyingly. 'I should have thought any one of your age would have come in with a 'op, skip, and a jump. Brought your evening—— Oh, don't do that!' The old man, crushing the journal into a ball, had thrown it fiercely in the direction of the fireplace. 'There may be a nice, interesting murder in it.'

'There would be a nice, interesting murder in to-morrow's paper,' said the old gentleman, in his deep voice, grimly, 'if I had my way.'

'You mustn't let that temper of yours run away with you. Seen anything of the fire?'

'What we want,' he cried vehemently, 'is another Odger. No, no,' answering her inquiry. 'You landladies haven't a thought above your business. Odger, I said. In the early sixties I used to go to every one of that man's meetings. Out here, on Clerkenwell Green, on Sunday mornings, we used to denounce everybody. Everybody! We went for the mercenary, we went for the aristocracy, we went for the middle classes! Why doesn't some one do it now?'

'P'r'aps they found it didn't make any difference. Bring your chair up to the table; Mr. Ballard isn't home yet, for some reason. He's on middle duty, too. You set down and I'll go and fetch your supper beer for you.'

'No, no,' he said, half rising. 'I can't allow——'

'You'll be better tempered,' said Mrs. Galer, taking the jug and finding some coppers under the brass candlestick, 'after you've had a bit of something to eat. 'Ungry men are always agitators. Shan't be a second.'

She was away rather longer than the space of time mentioned, because of information of a new baby Princess who had just come to town—('The old Queen *will* be pleased!' remarked the publican's wife, who herself seemed gratified by the circumstance)—news also of the fire. Engines were still coming up from all quarters, it appeared, racing madly with the knowledge that life depended upon it; head man of the brigade reported to be there; traffic was being sent by roundabout ways; the publican's wife looked on the incident as satisfactory, but in the interests of trade wished it had been nearer. When Mrs. Galer returned, her elderly lodger had finished the triangular chunk of potato pie which she had cut for him. He hummed vaguely and inaccurately a few bars of 'I wish I was with Nancy,' without, apparently, knowing that he was showing signs of a change in manner, until Mrs. Galer, mistaking the air as rendered by him for one of a more recent date, attempted to join in the melody.

'Shouldn't get so much annoyed,' he said excusingly, putting down the thick tumbler, 'if it wasn't for the newspapers. They say things that get on my nerves.'

'What makes you read 'em?

'They don't write nowadays as they used to write.'

'Wouldn't 'elp their circulation much if they did. People are different now, Mr. Leadbetter.'

'But are they better?' shouted the old gentleman, with a return to his heated manner. 'Have they improved? Are the brains of the younger generation as good as they were in my day? Take that young grandson of mine!'

'I should be sorry to,' she replied. 'If he'd only keep away from my Sid I should be glad.'

'Take your boy, then,' said the elderly lodger, not to be cheated of opportunity for argument. 'I can see what will become of that boy. I haven't lived in this world one-and-seventy years for nothing.'

'By all accounts,' retorted Mrs. Galer warmly, 'you was never one to waste your money. I reckon it's cost you precious little. Never gave a penny away in your life, did you?'

'My principles don't allow me to pauperise other people.'

'Never said a pleasant word to any one that was worried, have you?'

'Shouldn't have meant it if I had,' he said obstinately.

'Not on speaking terms with a single one of your relatives, are you?'

'Well for them that I'm not!'

'And yet,' she went on hurriedly, fearing that her annoyance would not last long enough to enable her to finish what she wanted to say, 'and yet you

have the—I don't know what—to talk about my Sid. Why, my boy is beginning his life; you're right the other end. He may become almost anything; all you can do is to look back on your life and count up the blunders you've made. I don't want to talk 'arsh to you, Mr. Leadbetter,' she said. Her manner softened; she went across to him, and patted his sleeve gently. 'Only don't you see how I'm situated. If I am not proud of my boy, I shan't 'ave anything to be proud of. Except the business. Dare say you think I'm silly.'

'If you hadn't more sense than most young women,' he said grudgingly, 'I shouldn't take the trouble to argue with you. Any matches?' He pulled at his pipe. 'You're plucky, too. If you met any misfortune, I believe you'd roll up your sleeves and fight like a man.'

'I notice,' said Mrs. Galer, with a quick return of good-humour, as she cleared one end of the table, 'that when you gentlemen want to pay a compliment to a lady, you always say that we're something like your own sex. I shall have to hot up this pie for Mr. Ballard. Something special's delayed him.'

'I remember when the Great Northern was opened,' remarked the elderly lodger in a reminiscent mood. 'In '52, I think. Lord! how excited we all were over railways at that time.'

Mrs. Galer had shopping to do in Exmouth Street. Not much shopping, for the housewife of Clerkenwell is content if she makes provision for one meal ahead, so that at night it is only the next morning's breakfast that has to be considered. Galer was

never a breakfast man; unless he wanted to go to a suburban race meeting, he stayed in bed and came down late, grumbling. Galer, she remembered, had had his last flirtation with work in taking home parcels from the laundry; a lamentable error caused him to deliver one of these parcels at an establishment where money was advanced on property, and he had thereupon been relieved of the duties. Galer did not greatly object to this; but he sometimes pointed out, in the course of discussion in public bars, that, owing to gross mismanagement on the part of the Government or the Creator or the old Metropolitan Board of Works, or somebody, it seemed impossible for a willing pair of hands to find anything to do. The little woman obtained what she wanted partly at the stalls where naphtha lights flared, and the proprietors had become hoarse-voiced from shouting extravagant words of adulation; mainly in shops with a preference always for those who were numbered amongst her own patrons. She had an unerring eye for the articles she required; a definite knowledge of the selling value.

'Wondered who it was,' she cried. 'I was jest about to turn round and give *such* a look!'

'Let me carry—carry your parcels.'

'You're out of breath, Mr. Ballard.'

'Been running,' explained the uniformed man.

'Win anything?'

'Run all the way 'ome from the Royal Free, and then from 'ome I cut round 'ere. Thought it was your black straw directly I caught sight of it.'

'And you couldn't manage to take your supper

out of the oven then? You are a 'elpless lot, you men. Made much to-day?'

'Middling,' replied the railway-man cautiously, as he tried to get into step with her. 'Rather a quantity of luggage about one way and another.' He coughed. 'Bad day for some people, though.'

'I'm told it's quite a fair-sized fire.' The sky northward was lighted up more brightly than usual, and she stopped to regard it.

'Got its drawbacks.'

An old lady, coming out of a shop as they were about to turn to the right, arrested him, and demanded to be informed whether the Great Western were running any cheap excursions; on Ballard admitting inability to give an answer, pleading that he belonged to another company, the old lady denounced him, saying that he had no right to go walking about in uniform, misleading people.

'What were you saying about the Royal Free?' asked Mrs. Galer, as he came up to her again. 'You don't know anybody in there.'

'Tell you when we get indoors,' said Ballard curtly. 'I can talk better sitting down.'

Ballard opened the door with his latchkey. The boy, his face streaked with excitement, ran across from the opposite side of the roadway.

'Not abed yet?' remarked Ballard.

'Clever guesser,' retorted the boy.

'Answer Mr. Ballard properly, Sid.'

'You don't know where I've been, mother! Been all over the place this evening. Biggest lark I've had for months.'

'Take off your boots,' ordered his mother gently, 'and go straight up to bed. Boys who can't come in early don't 'ave no supper. That's the rule, isn't it, Mr. Ballard?'

'So *I* was always taught,' corroborated the railway-man.

'Chap run over by a fire-engine,' said the boy excitedly. 'Coppers brought a stretcher with a 'ood on it, wheeled 'im off; I followed in the crowd acrost to Gray's Inn Road; waited until the news came out.'

'Do as your mother tells you,' ordered Ballard, 'and cut off upstairs.'

'*You* can't say anything,' contended the boy. 'You were there as well.'

'Mr. Ballard's different,' said his mother.

'I think I ought to tell you now,' said Ballard awkwardly. The boy stopped half-way up the stairs. 'Won't take long. That poor chap, that chap that was run over by a fire-engine——'

'Well!'

'He was Galer!'

'My 'usband?'

'Your 'usband. He was—well, we'll say three-parts. And I'm sorry to tell you he's done for.'

The boy came down two steps; there was silence for a minute. She looked up white-faced and trembling, and patted her son's hand. The boy came closer to her.

'You 've got me, mummie,' he said affectionately.

CHAPTER II

THE closed carriages stood outside the refreshment rooms, near the gates; the black horses, taking a drink out of pails, were being inspected critically by their temporary owners. The drink over, the black horses showed restiveness under comments, and the critics went a step further back on the pavement. Men and women, red and swollen-eyed, returned a handkerchief to the head of the syndicate which owned it, and children, encouraged to resignation by the double prospect of something to eat and a ride home, were already advancing so far towards their normal state as to be on the very edge of mischief. Master Galer had startled three little girls by pulling at the black bow of their pigtails; had ordered two boys off the pavement, and was organising a game of trains, himself for guard, with the exclusive right of opening and closing the doors of the carriages, when Miss Jeffrey came in search of him.

'I'm surprised at you,' said Miss Jeffrey. 'On this day above all others.'

'Well, *you've* no business to be 'ere at all, be rights. 'Tisn't your funeral.'

'You begin to shout,' said Miss Jeffrey, 'and I'll

give you something to shout for. If I had any control in the matter I'd spoil you, my lad. But not in the way your mother does. Eight year old,' she added pointedly, 'eight year old, and can't spell antimacassar.'

'Thirty-two year old,' retorted the boy, 'and can't get a 'usband.'

'Sid Galer,' said Miss Jeffrey solemnly, 'do you know where story-tellers go to?'

'You'll find out in course of time,' said the boy. 'You told mother your age when you came in the other evening to fit her on.'

'Thought you were asleep.'

'Not the first mistake you've made.'

Miss Jeffrey waited a moment outside the Reliance Refreshment Rooms, and gave up her hold of the boy. Inside, his mother, looking from the duty of stirring the teapot, saw him; her face brightened at once.

'I'm not going to quarrel with you to-day, Sid Galer,' said Miss Jeffrey, bending down; 'you've just put your father away, and it's cost your mother three twelve six for her black alone and no weeds. What I want to say to you is, mind you behave yourself properly like a little gentleman, and don't worry your mother more than you can 'elp. If you do, be quite sure the time will come when you'll rue it.'

'What you want,' remarked the boy, 'is a poke-bonnet and a tambourine, and the trick of marching backwards.'

All the same, the boy, awed by the general air of

reserve worn by other customers, and the fact that his mother and Miss Jeffrey conversed in whispers, did comport himself more decorously. This attitude found itself encouraged by the circumstance that for once the tiresome preamble was ignored, and he began with cake and finished with cake, the while youngsters more sternly treated looked at him enviously over a thick wall of bread and butter.

'I don't mind admitting this, Mrs. Galer,' said Miss Jeffrey confidentially, behind her hand. 'You've put him away well. I've been to many: in fact, I make a point of going, especially if I've had the work to do of getting the dresses ready; and nothing pleases me so much, nothing gratifies me so much, as to see people take for their motto in affairs of this kind, "No stint!"'

'It's the last thing we're able to do.'

'That's *my* argument,' claimed Miss Jeffrey. 'And although it may seem a bit of a wrench at the time, you never regret it after. Besides which, black suits most people, and it always comes in handy. You never know,' went on the dressmaker encouragingly, 'you never know how soon you may want it again.'

'I shall wear it six months,' said Mrs. Galer thoughtfully; 'six months to the very day.'

'If you're spared.'

'Kin I 'ave another piece, mother?' asked the boy. 'I've only 'ad three!'

The waitress brought a further supply, together with information concerning parties seated at other

tables. That lot over there by the ginger-beer advertisement had lost a little girl, the third within a twelvemonth; people up at the end, who were having high tea with pork pies and plates of ham, and seemed to be doing the thing with something like extravagance, had lost an aunt; the aunt had had money, it seemed, in the Post Office Savings-bank. Over fifteen pounds altogether. The waitress expected reciprocity, and asked Miss Jeffrey privately whether Mrs. Galer had lost a friend; Miss Jeffrey replied, 'Not exactly a friend; only a 'usband.'

'Better have another cup,' urged Miss Jeffrey. 'It's no use being downhearted. After all, there's many worse off. How would you have felt if you'd lost a really good man?'

'Galer was a good man to me,' said the little woman quickly. Her friend gasped. 'Pour it into the cup if you don't mind; I can't get at it very well if you send it all over the table. I used to complain about him now and again, but it's a way we women get into. Ask anybody you like, and they'll all tell you that he was considerate to the last degree.'

'Why——'

'He was fond of his glass,' went on Mrs. Galer impartially, 'but this I must say for him, he always knew when he'd had enough. Sid, don't go making too many crumbs.'

'But he didn't stop when he'd had enough.'

'You don't find the perfect man nowadays, Miss Jeffrey. That fact you'll discover for yourself in

course of time. Besides, you won't want him. The perfect man would be a perfect nuisance.'

'I trust,' replied the tall lady, 'that whatever my lot may be and where'er I roam, I may always take care to pick and choose. Have you thought any more of what I suggested about your giving up the business?'

'If there wasn't people looking on,' she replied, 'I should be inclined to burst out laughing at you.'

'You never listen to advice.'

'I listen to it,' she said. 'I don't mind doing that. But if I'd taken all the advice that's been given to me, I know what my address would be at the present moment. I'm going to keep on the business; I've got me eye on your cellar, as a matter of fact; I'm going to keep on me lodgers; Sid can sleep in my room, and there'll be the first floor back to let. I may be able to save money now if I'm only careful.'

'And what are you going to do when you have saved it?' demanded Miss Jeffrey exasperatedly. Mrs. Galer moved the sugar-basin away to a point where its powers of temptation would be reduced; she patted the head of her scrunching boy.

'Looks quite the man in a bowler hat, doesn't he, Miss Jeffrey? Bought it a little large for him so as to allow for growing.' Mrs. Galer looked at him admiringly. Miss Jeffrey sniffed.

'What's 'leven times 'leven?' asked the dressmaker coldly.

'Don't you know?' inquired the boy.

'And what was the date of the Crimea war?'

''Fore my time!'

'Why was Lady Jane Grey beheaded?'

'Because she kept asking silly questions.'

'He knows,' said his mother apologetically, 'but he's shy about answering when there are people present. Like going to school, don't you, Sid?'

'The one joy of my life,' answered the boy, winking.

Mrs. Galer rapped against the saucer with a silver coin, and the waitress came from the duty of gleaning general information; in reckoning the account she made sixpence halfpenny and twopence halfpenny come to tenpence, and Sid was the first to detect the inaccuracy. As they went, Mrs. Galer pointed out to her friend that he was sharper than some people imagined, and Miss Jeffrey replied (without any extravagant show of joy) that she felt glad to receive the news. Outside, Milly, the head girl at the laundry, was going up and down the line of carriages bearing a wreath: the young party in the shop in Rosoman Street had promised it should be ready by noon on the day, but, it appeared, had clean forgotten all about it; the three girls who had clubbed together to purchase it waited on the young party at the shop, and told her plainly what they thought of such behaviour, deriding her last plea that it would never have happened but for the fact that she had had a row with her favourite young man at a dance at the Holborn on the previous Saturday evening; the laundry girls told her that affairs of the heart and affairs of the flower shop were distinct and separate things, and that the best

plan for her to adopt was to set to and make the wreath with all possible despatch. Milly said that, so far as her own feelings towards the young party of the shop were concerned, she never could forgive her. The driver, who now wore his silk hat jovially at the back of his head, and seemed anxious to tell them how he had hurt his thumb four weeks since at this very place, allowed himself to be persuaded to have another glass, and the three women went back to the cemetery. Looking round, they saw Sid giving to one of the drivers a cigarette, and taking a light from another driver's cigar: the boy opened the door of their carriage, and with an air of adolescence sat on the mat, gazing critically between the puffs at the cigarette.

'"Like father, like son,"' quoted Miss Jeffrey.

'It doesn't follow,' cried Mrs. Galer. 'I've known lots of cases where——' They entered the gates, and she lowered her tone reverentially.

She consulted with the clay-suited man shovelling earth, on the probable cost of a tombstone, but the man's information was wanting in the quality of definiteness, for he could only say that it depended on how much you were prepared to give. The clayey man proved more useful in regard to texts and sentiments; he said it was a hobby of his to commit these to memory, and that nothing amused his wife and baby at home more than to hear him spin off in the evening the whole lot of them. Mrs. Galer felt inclined to give favourable consideration to something simple, like 'Highly respected,' tempted also by two lines of poetry:—

'He lived a life of sterling worth,
And now has vanished from this earth';

but her companions gave their adherence to others of a vaguer kind, and the clay-suited man, on hearing that the immediate cause was an accident, suggested 'Cut down like a flower.' Miss Jeffrey thought the simile imperfect. He also mentioned that talking was dry work, and, finding this hint was not accepted, followed it by one broader and more direct, and, this being also ignored, seemed to lose interest in the subject, and, remarking austerely that he was not paid to cackle to a lot of women, resumed work. Mrs. Galer looked down into the half-filled space.

'You 'll get married again,' said Milly encouragingly, as they turned away. 'You 're quite young. Shouldn't wonder but what you 'll find yourself quite sought after. Besides, you 'll be lonely else.'

'I 've got the business,' she said.

'You 'll encounter your misfortunes,' said Miss Jeffrey, pained by the presence of optimistic talk, 'same as any one else. You 've got rid of him, it 's true, but it doesn't follow that you 're going to be equally lucky in everything else.'

'We shall have to make that boy of yours a little more useful,' remarked Milly, interrupting the other counsellor. 'He 's quite big enough now to fetch parcels and take 'em back at the end of the week.'

'I wouldn't have him neglect his school if it was ever so.' They came out of the cemetery gates, and the little woman raised her voice. 'I don't want him when he 's grown up to turn round and say, "Mother,

why didn't I 'ave more schooling when I was a bit of a boy?" Besides, I believe that in his innermost 'eart he likes learning.'

'I don't know anything about his innermost heart,' said Miss Jeffrey. '(Which one is our carriage?)—but from all I hear——'

'I'm not going to get cross with you two,' cried Mrs. Galer, 'especially to-day. You both mean well, and it's kind of you to have come to see me through with the job of putting my poor dear 'usband away. But I tell you straight Sid's a good boy, and I won't have a single word said against him.'

The driver, rubbing his scarlet forehead with the back of his hand, ducked underneath a horse's nose-bag and came across the roadway.

''Ere's a pretty go!' exclaimed the driver, damp with perturbation. 'If anybody had said that this was going to 'appen to me I should have let them 'ave one straight from the shoulder. One like this!'

'Surely nobody's been saying anything about your complexion?' argued Milly. 'What kind of soap do you use?'

'*You're* not what I call a type of British beauty,' said the driver.

'If it was the Fifth of November,' said the girl, 'I should 'ave said you was wearing a mask.'

'I've got plenty on me mind,' he said agitatedly, 'without bandying words with you, my girl. This means the sack for me. When I get back to my place, first thing they'll ask will be, "Where's the

kerridge and where's the 'orses, for goodness sake?"'

'And where are they?' asked Mrs. Galer.

'Your boy knows. I don't. He's drove off with 'em!'

'Horses and all?' The superfluous question came from Miss Jeffrey.

'Why don't you run after him?' inquired Mrs. Galer.

'What!' demanded the driver indignantly. 'With my bad thumb?'

They hurried down the road, Miss Jeffrey with the air of a successful prophetess, Milly regretting the loss of a ride home, the driver wholly indignant and stalking along, much tempted to use strong language when rallied by omnibus conductors, who wished to know whether he had found a whip or whether he had lost a horse and van. He became less furious on passing a conspicuous tavern, because he was reminded of a story concerning himself, and another party; finding Milly appreciative, the driver told her a second anecdote and yet a third, with the result that by the time they reached the Angel, the duty of keeping a look-out had devolved on Mrs. Galer and on Miss Jeffrey; Miss Jeffrey said plainly that if she had known this was going to happen she would not have put on her Sunday boots. The driver, remonstrated with by the limping lady for not showing greater interest in a calamity which so nearly concerned him, replied philosophically that in his experience he had never found it of the least help in the time of a crisis to burst into tears.

'And now,' complained the driver, 'now you've made me forget the point of the story what I was telling this young lady.'

Mrs. Galer, tired by the long walk, had begun to be impressed by the gloomy forebodings of her companion (now quite certain that the boy had been induced to sell the horses and carriage for a mere song, and drawing a vivid picture of the scene in Clerkenwell Police Court), when near the corner she caught sight of her boy on the look-out; he waved his arms energetically, and they all hurried to find the undertaker's property quite safe in a side street, Sid keeping off some boys who were anxious to stroke the black horses, to touch the carriage, and to obtain an explanation of all the circumstances.

'Steady on, steady on!' cried the boy, wriggling.

'But I'm so glad to see you,' said his mother, kissing him again. 'Whatever possessed you to do it, Sid?'

'Read about it in a book,' replied the boy importantly. 'Only that was out in America; and there was four 'orses, and they galloped along madly on edge of a ravin'.'

'I'm thankful you're safe.'

'Everything seems to be in order,' announced the driver, returning from his examination, 'fortunately enough. My lad,' he said courteously, 'give me the favour of 'alf a minute's conversation just round 'ere. Shan't keep you more than 'alf a minute. You ladies step in, and I can drive you down to our place; and no one need be any the wiser if you only

keep your heads shut. Just 'alf a minute, my lad, if you don't mind.'

'Leave your whip!' urged the boy.

'I may want it,' said the driver.

The driver remarked, when he climbed up into his seat, that the boy seemed a cleverish lad, but there should be a medium in all things. The boy had decided to walk home, for a variety of reasons; one of these was that he wished to find his chum, Johnnie Leadbetter, and recite, with embellishments calculated to make that young gentleman envious, an account of the stirring incident of which he had been the hero. Master Leadbetter, an incredulous youth, given to flat contradiction of any and every statement made to him, had once gone so far as to deny the accuracy of a geographical statement made by a master at the Board School; the result still remained in his memory.

'You weren't 'arsh with my boy, I hope?' said Mrs. Galer out of the window. Miss Jeffrey clicked her tongue, and in the desire for sympathy condescended to exchange a glance with the head girl of the laundry, seated opposite.

'Not what *I* call 'arsh,' replied the driver. 'My thumb 'ampers me so.'

Kimmer Street had resumed its normal appearance, but for the laundry, on the door of which a black-bordered card had been impaled; earlier in the afternoon the street had been crowded, for in the presence of a funeral a certain neglect of domestic duties was not only a polite attention, but almost a pious duty.

Thoughtful of Ballard to get home early and have tea prepared. Mrs. Galer confessed that she would be ready for another cup so soon as she had changed, and Miss Jeffrey admitted that once she found herself in a pair of easy boots she, too, would be able to share in the meal. In his way the Great Northern man showed sympathy by recounting the particulars of what he called a nasty smash-up just outside Finsbury Park; little Mrs. Galer, in her commiseration for those concerned, forgot her own sorrows, and Ballard (who went about the room with bent head for fear of causing disaster) had the rare opportunity of congratulating himself on his tact. Discussion thus opened went forward on these lines, with many an incident culled from the fruitful gardens of Clerkenwell, where high misfortune always marked the parties concerned with distinction.

'If I was one of them West-end people that 'ave nothing to do but brood,' remarked Mrs. Galer, clearing the table, 'I might persuade myself I was hard done by.'

'Why don't you set down,' urged Ballard, 'and give yourself a rest for once? I can wash up them cups and saucers jest as well as you can.'

'As it is, thanks be,' went on the little woman ignoring the suggestion, 'I can bustle about, and occupy my mind. All the same, I shall miss him.'

You 're bound to miss him,' agreed Miss Jeffrey. 'If I 'd married that poor young chap who was a silver-chaser before he caught pneumonia, I should

have been quite cut up about it. I can just imagine what it must be to find yourself a widow for the first time. Dear, dear,' said the tall lady reminiscently, 'how fond that chap was of me; can't understand what made him so.'

'P'r'aps,' suggested Ballard, in a complimentary manner; 'p'r'aps you was better looking then than you are now.'

'Don't think anybody would say I 'd gone off in me looks.'

'They might not *say* it,' he remarked.

'I suppose nobody called whilst I was away, Mr. Ballard?' asked Mrs. Galer.

'I took in one or two parcels.'

'So I see. No messages, I s'pose?'

'It 'll always be a comfort to me,' remarked Miss Jeffrey dreamily, 'to feel that, whatever happens, I haven't been absolutely overlooked. I may not have got married, but no one can say I haven't been took notice of.'

'There was one message,' replied Ballard, on Mrs. Galer repeating her question. 'I 'll tell you about it presently.'

'I shall find my Sid come in very useful now,' said Mrs. Galer, dusting the mantelpiece, 'running errands and so forth. Here 's one of Galer's pipes,' she remarked. 'Poor dear, I think that was one of the strongest points in his character. His love for tobacco, I mean. Sid takes after him. But only in that way,' she added hastily. 'He 's a quick boy too, once he makes up his mind to learn.'

'A youngster,' said Ballard, picking his words

carefully, 'a youngster can't learn unless he goes to school regular.' There came a pause.

'Now I wonder what you mean by that, Mr. Ballard?'

'Didn't mean to tell you to-night. But if you must know, you must. School-board officer called round just now; said your boy hadn't been attending properly of late. Told him it was unbeknown to you. He said he couldn't help that. Said that he was obliged to leave this for you. Hope you don't think I'm always bringing you bad news.'

Mrs. Galer tried to hum and relinquished the effort, but started again, and this time went on. She looked at her reflection in the small mirror.

I wouldn't worry,' said Ballard.

Course not, course not,' she said. She turned to them cheerfully. 'Only I do seem to be having my pretty good share, don't I?'

'Never rains but it pours,' quoted Miss Jeffrey.

CHAPTER III

NEAR to clearing-up time on a Saturday night, and the girls in the laundry, who had been working, with intervals for rest, since Tuesday morning at ten, were allowing irons to become cool. Lines strung across just below the ceiling slack and unoccupied; Mrs. Galer, making up the last of the parcels and comparing lists, with now and again sharp inquiry concerning a collar missing or a handkerchief in excess, had her bodice ornamented with pins, with which she deftly secured packages. The girls pulled sleeves down to their wrists, and Milly gave a few steps of a dance; the girl who did piecework had her penny exercise-book containing an account of the week's work; so soon as Mrs. Galer had finished with the pencil this would be presented for consideration and settlement. On the kerb of the pavement outside stood the roughly made hand-cart, by aid of which Sid (that day permitted to take the crape band from his cap) had been effecting delivery of parcels in the neighbourhood, a task bringing in twopence, but giving excuse for gibes from other small boys of Clerkenwell, who affected to look on the conveyance as a mail-cart, and to recognise in Sid Galer, the nurse.

'What you doing in the front room, there?' called Mrs. Galer suddenly. The short passage between the shop and the house was open.

'Nothing, mother!' replied the boy.

'Then leave off, and come 'ere this minute.'

He obeyed, placing something in a corner near the doorway.

'Into mischief again?' asked Milly.

'I shall dot you one,' he said, privately, to Milly, 'if you can't keep that mouth of yours shut.'

'I won't have you to talk to the girls like that,' said his quick-eared mother.

The girls made defiant faces at the boy. 'Kin I go out and play now, mother?' he asked.

'Who with? Ah,' she sighed, as he gave the information grudgingly, 'I wish you could find some better companions. I want you to grow up a good lad, so's you can be my packer and sorter. Won't that be jolly when you can work inside here every day, and 'elp mother with her business?' The boy growled a vague reply. 'Don't be gone more'n ten minutes, mind, or a quarter of a hower at the utmost, because I want you to do one more round. I shall 'ave 'em ready for you by that time. Would you like your twopence now?'

'No!'

'No what?'

'No fear!'

He turned rather awkwardly to go back through the short passage. 'Ready for our money, Mrs. Galer,' said Milly. 'I've subbed rather a lot this week, I'm afraid.'

''Eaven send,' remarked Mrs. Galer, with a fine pretence of anxiety, ''Eaven send I've got enough in the cash-box to pay you all.' The girls laughed; they could not have been more amused if this weekly joke had possessed novelty.

Master Galer tied the string of his small oblong parcel, and found himself detained for a moment in admiring contemplation of the portrait of a conspicuous burglar in the weekly newspaper, which he had used to envelop the contents. 'Wish I'd been christened Alias,' he said. He held the parcel under his jacket, and crept to the doorway, standing back politely to allow Ballard to enter. Ballard, never an adroit man with children, had an idea that it gratified them to have their hair disturbed.

At the end of the street, near the boot shop, a short figure wearing a smudge on his face, and carrying what from the scent of it appeared to be a bull's-eye lantern, came out of a doorway.

'A friend,' answered Master Galer.

'Advance friend, and give the countersign.'

'Let me see,' said the boy, puzzled, 'what was the countersign for to-night?'

'"Perdition" was the countersign for to-night,' growled the other, 'and you ought to remember.'

'Perdition!' said Sid Galer.

The two shook hands solemnly, and Johnnie Leadbetter demanded of his comrade whether there was anything to report. Comrade replied that he had something to report, but not just yet; it must wait until they found themselves in ambush. Some-

what incommoded by the parcel which he carried, he gave it in charge of a tearful knickerbockered boy, looking after the outside display of a greengrocer's shop, saying that if it were placed at his disposal in the course of about an hour he would be generous enough to abstain from clipping somebody's ear. The knickerbockered boy said desolately that every one seemed to make a dead set at him, and that he wished he had never been born; consented all the same to become the bailee of the parcel, and the two young bloods went on their way.

'On a maraudering expedition,' said Master Leadbetter, replying to the inquiry.

'What time shall we be back?'

''Ave I asted you yet to come with me?' inquired young Leadbetter, with dangerous politeness. 'You wait, my lad. I pick and choose my men, I do. I don't snatch at the first that offer. If a chap isn't up to the standard I make him stand a one side.'

'If you knew what I'd done to-night you wouldn't talk like that to me.'

'You're all talk, my son,' remarked the commander of the band, relenting slightly. 'What I want about me is men of action. Men who'll go through fire and water for the sake of the cause.'

'My mother's got her money out of the club on account of father, paid over to her this morning.' The commander growled indifferently at receipt of this information. 'Paid over to her in sovereigns, it was.'

'Wish I could get a relative run over,' said the

commander wistfully. 'If I could put my 'and on £20 at the present moment I should be off to Australia like a shot.' He stopped, and Sidney stopped, leaning against a bank of shop shutters which were off duty; the two looked up at the busy, lighted star of roads near the Angel. Tram-cars lurched round corners, paused for a moment, and then went in a new direction; omnibuses started off to the four points. 'And in less than no time I should be engaged in a 'and-to-'and struggle with Red Indians.'

'Ain't you thinking of America?'

The commander raised an arm suddenly and threateningly. Sid Galer dodged, and did not press consideration of this detail.

'I 'm cut out for a free and open life,' went on the older boy. 'I 'm wasted 'ere. My old gran'father that lodges at your place, he told me that he 'd once in the old days had a chance of going abroad when he was a bit of a lad, but they let him off, and he 's bitterly regretted it ever since. Twen'y pound would do it,' said the commander dreamily. 'I should never want to see old England again, unless it was jest to run 'ome with a few nuggets of gold to show my people.'

'Wouldn't you,' asked Sidney, with respect, 'wouldn't you take a trusty lieutenant with you?'

'Let 's make our way cautiously towards King's Cross. Likely enough we may encounter some of the rest of the band.'

Well known to both that no one but Sid Galer acknowledged the leadership; pleasing, never-

theless, to imagine that, at a shrill whistle from the commander, hundreds of sturdy supporters would run up from the byways off St. John Street Road, and so long as this was not put to the test the superstition was easy of belief. The two separated at the Angel with a whispered agreement to meet in ten minutes' time outside the Great Northern station. Sid saw his commander select a tram-car (the conductor of which was collecting fares on top) and jump on, alighting easily and calmly when the conductor's boots appeared in sight above to select another conveyance; he endeavoured to emulate this example, and in the attempt to get a footing, found himself suddenly caught at the elbow and assisted from within. At that moment the conductor reappeared, and demanded fares.

'Now you've done it,' complained the boy. 'You've done it now, sir. Funny thing, you grown-ups must always interfere.'

'Thought you were trying to get in, Galer.'

'You'd better pay up and look pleasant. I've got plenty of money, but I 'aven't it on me. Thanks!' he added gruffly.

'Getting into trouble, aren't you, one way and another? My former head-master was telling me——'

'If I get into trouble, I shall get out of it, Mr. Bryant.'

'The entrance is easier than the exit. You want guiding.'

'I want being left alone.'

The passengers listened, and for this reason the boy put on an air of extreme independence. Through the window of the car he saw his commander tramping down the hill caressing a right shoulder that had evidently received damage.

'Wonder now,' said the young man, looking curiously over his pince-nez, 'whether they will be able to make anything of him.'

'You have not introduced us,' remarked a lady seated opposite.

'My dear! So sorry! Galer, let me present you to my wife.'

''Ullo!' said Master Galer.

'Are you one of the boys who goes to the school where my husband used to be?' asked Mrs. Bryant.

'Sometimes!'

'Galer's mother is a very good, hard-working woman,' explained Mr. Bryant. 'Best tempered person in Clerkenwell. Her son has not inherited all those traits. Don't care for school, do you, Galer?'

'Stop away when I think I will.'

'And absence,' continued the schoolmaster, 'does not seem to make his heart grow fonder. In fact, matters, I understand, have come to such a pass, that——'

'I get down here,' interrupted the boy. He did not care that the passengers, and especially that the pleasant-voiced young woman opposite, should hear any more in his presence. 'Thanks for the lift. Good-night, sir. Stop?' answering the conductor's question indignantly. 'Why I could jump off if it was going sixty mile an hour.'

The commander of the gang on arrival seemed chastened by events; less inclined for show of authority, desirous rather of obtaining sympathy; he remarked, however, with an effort to regain his manly style, that he wished now he had not effected an exchange of his pistol with a chap in Meredith Street for a set of penny journals for boys. He acceded to the proposal of Sidney Galer that they should go into the station, and take record in a pocket-book of the numbers of all the locomotives; the depressed commander remarked that he did not see what special use this was, but the band said the idea was to get all the secret information possible. The pocket-book already contained a list of the numbers borne by policemen in their own district, taken furtively.

'Now then, how many more of you?' demanded a young porter with a trolley. 'What's your business, I should like to know? Cut off 'ome soon as ever you're ready.'

'Mr. Ballard on duty still?' asked the boy.

'It wanted about twen'y to eight when he left. Got a message for him?'

'He lodges at my mother's place,' replied Sid Galer.

'Don't hang about here too long,' advised the young porter.

'How much did the station cost you?' asked Johnnie Leadbetter, encouraged by the change of tone. The young porter dropped the trolley. 'Caught me,' whimpered the commander to Sid Galer a minute afterwards, 'caught me jest on

the very same place where that tram conductor gave me one.'

'You seem to be out for a bit of a blow.'

'And you,' the commander turned sharply and bitterly on his follower, 'you're a nice lot of 'elp, ain't you? Stand looking on and not so much as—— Take that!'

'If you strike me again,' cried Sid Galer, 'I jest shan't tell you what I was going to tell you.'

They persuaded themselves presently to leave the enchanting place, with its bookstalls that looked like flower-gardens, passengers endeavouring distractedly to find the wrong platform; mountains of luggage coming at the last minute, ladies giving coins to porters with the nervous air of committing a breach of the law; long trains starting for Scotland with magnificent guards swinging perilously into break vans, leaving tearful folk waving a good-bye and wishing they had brought two handkerchiefs; red lamps of departing trains disappearing at the curve. The two walked boldly through the booking-office, and Johnnie Leadbetter went to one of the openings and inquired the first-class return fare to King's Cross; the booking-clerk reasoned with him gently, endeavouring to persuade him that the inquiry was worded incorrectly, and pointing out that this was the name of the station where he stood; the booking-clerk added indulgently that the mistake was a common one. Johnnie remarked that it seemed a funny thing that you could not get a civil answer to a civil question, and threatened to report the incident to the general manager, and

the discussion would have been continued on these lines only that at that moment the young porter came through counting coppers; the two boys, on finding they were recognised by him, thought it advisable to run. The clock gave the hour as half-past ten.

'You get back 'ome,' ordered young Leadbetter, 'else you'll get into hot water. I'll go round to Judd Street and see if I can catch sight of her.'

'Not going 'ome,' said the boy. And smiled mysteriously.

'Can't quite make you out to-night, Sid Galer. I should say you'd got something on your mind, only that you 'aven't got a mind.'

They crossed the busy roadway.

'Wonder whether I shall be able to sleep in the train?' said the Galer boy. He put one thumb in the arm-hole of his waistcoat and swaggered. Some of the passers-by stopped to look at him. 'I shall be all right if I can get a corner seat.'

'If you've got cash enough to go for a ride on the Underground,' remarked the other, 'jest 'and it over at once. According to the rules, all money is supposed to be dealt with by the head one.'

'First I 've heard of it.'

'You 'aven't 'eard the last of it, me man. Show us how much you got, or else I'll 'ave you expelled.'

They had a struggle at the beginning of Judd Street: Johnnie Leadbetter turned out, by force, his follower's pockets, and found the core of an apple, some pieces of string, the pocket-book, and a quantity of literature.

'Now I 've got to bump you against the wall,' he said complainingly, 'jest for giving your commander wrong information. Then you can go back and tell your mother I 've hurt you.'

'I 'm going to Liverpool by the midnight train,' protested the other, backing away. 'And I wish—I wish mother was coming with me.'

'That makes two I owe you.'

'I could afford to take you, but I shan't.'

'You talking in your sleep?' demanded the commander interestedly. 'If you 're kidding me, I 'm afraid I shall 'ave to thoroughly spoil that face of yours for you.'

'I 'm going to ask Janie if she 'd like to come with me. I 'd rather it was mother, but——'

'Come 'ere and tell us what you 're talking about.'

'Fen punching, then?'

'Fen punching!' agreed the commander.

Johnnie Leadbetter, absorbed in listening to the information communicated to him in an undertone, but showing less of enthusiasm than might have been expected, took off his cap presently, that the evening air might cool his head. A girl, about twelve years of age, with her hair so tightly bound with steel curlers that she appeared to be wearing a helmet, came across the roadway, hiding a jug underneath her short apron.

'Oh, good-evening,' she said. The boys stopped, and glanced at her shyly. 'Glad one of you 's learnt how to take off his cap to a lady.'

'Whereabouts is the lady?'

'Take your 'ands out of your pockets when you talk to anybody.'

'I saw you sipping at your mother's supper-beer, Janie Wills.'

'I beg your pardon,' said Miss Wills sedately, 'I'm a strict Band of Hoper. And mother only takes it as a medicine. She's not 'alf well just now.'

'Shall I mention it?' asked Sid of his commander privately. Johnnie replied that Sid could please himself; and Sid, having beckoned to the girl to come nearer, spoke in an undertone.

'Oh no!' she said promptly. 'Oh dear no! Couldn't think of such a thing. Whatever would people say? Besides, to-morrow is our anniversary service.'

'Glad you can't manage it,' retorted the boy.

'Very kind of you to have asked. Did I tell you I was going in for a scholarship at school?'

She appeared to be anxious to go, but postponed her departure in the hope of finding some more effective parting shot. 'You're in trouble again, aren't you? Heard something about it just now.'

The boy whirled round affrightedly. 'Have they found it out already?' he cried. 'Are they searching for me?'

'I didn't hear all the particulars.'

'There's one thing,' he said, looking round wildly for sympathy, 'they won't find it on me. And if I don't tell them where it is they'll never get to know.'

'As mother says,' remarked Miss Wills, going, 'the ratepayers have to keep the schools going and they've a right to expect that children attend regular. Says she blames your mother more than you. Says it's often like that where there's only one in the fam'ly.'

'Do you know what I call your mother?' The boy found himself restored to calm on finding his worst fears ungrounded. 'Do you know what my name for her is?'

The girl ran across the roadway: traffic of the street blunted the point of Sid Galer's satire. Johnnie Leadbetter, gratified at the failure of his friend's scheme, talked sagely on the way home, throwing aside the character previously assumed, and being reminded by his follower, admitted that so far as Red Indians were concerned, there was no proof that any had really existed: people who wrote books very often put down just what happened to come into their heads. He went further, and threw doubt on the geographical teaching which both had received; a chap would look silly if he got away from England and then found, what indeed seemed highly probable, that all this talk about foreign countries had been invented by schoolmasters in order to worry the boys under their charge and to give themselves a reputation for cleverness. Johnnie Leadbetter's bull's-eye lantern went out as they crossed Gray's Inn Road, and the disagreeable smell of this increased his sobriety of manner; he repeated some stories that he had overheard about the old Clerkenwell

House of Detention and of the unpleasant to-do that happened there when some one attempted years ago to blow it up. Sid asked what the girl had meant by saying she was going in for a scholarship; Master Leadbetter replied that it was probably some childish nonsense, and Sid remarked that, be that as it might, he for one did not like the idea of allowing girls to march in front of them. In regard to the present emergency, Johnnie had no advice to give, and only desired to make it clear that he, for one, washed his hands of the matter: he himself would no more think of going abroad in any circumstances than of trying to fly. Seeing his grandfather enter a public-house where a framed card in the window said that a Discussion Forum was held every Saturday night, and that the evening's discussion would be on the question, 'Do We Need a Monarchy?' he left Sid, and the boy stopped for a while to consider with serious and wrinkled brow the predicament. A good thought occurred to him. Hastening to the greengrocer's shop, he ordered the sad, knickerbockered boy to restore to him the oblong parcel, promising two glass marbles in payment to be rendered at an unfixed date; the greengrocer's boy remarked that this was all very well, but he wished people had better memories.

'That you?' A regretful note in his mother's voice. 'Wherever 'ave you been?'

'Round the 'ouses, mother.'

'Something terrible has 'appened. Something

worse than all that's gone before. Come through the passage into the shop, this minute.'

The girls were seated on the white-cloth'd tables, swinging feet dolefully; a penny account-book open on one lap, commiseration on every feature. Mrs. Galer stood at the doorway peering up the street, her hand at her throat.

'What's your cash-box doing,' asked the boy casually, 'just to the left under the 'orse-'air sofa in the front room?'

'Sid!' cried his mother, turning suddenly. The girls slipped from the table, rushed excitedly through the passage, returned at once, Milly bearing the box high up in a triumphant manner. 'You clever boy to find it after we'd all searched 'igh and low.'

'You want to wear glasses, some of you,' said the boy, 'or else get a little dog and an accordion.'

'It's found, Mr. Ballard,' cried the little woman delightedly. The railway-man had entered the shop door with a policeman. 'Can't think how you came to overlook it. Shan't want to trouble you now, constable; here's a trifle for yourself. Mr. Ballard.' She put her hand on the boy's shoulder. 'Don't you think I'm a lucky woman to have such a clever boy for a son? Start on that last clearing round, Sid. He's going to be such a comfort to me, Mr. Ballard, once he grows out of his boyish ways.'

Ballard coughed meaningly. The boy's cheeks became flushed, and he took an armful of parcels. Ballard followed him.

'Ain't you ashamed?' said Ballard, in a low tone; 'ain't you perfectly ashamed to let your mother praise you when you don't deserve it?'

'P'r'aps I ain't,' answered the boy curtly, 'p'r'aps I am!'

CHAPTER IV

SERGEANT SWANSON, of the G Division, called one evening as Mrs. Galer was bunching shirt fronts together and dipping them into one of the three earthenware pans of raw starch, and announced jovially that he had brought trouble. Mrs. Galer apologised for being in her disables: the sergeant seemed greatly amused, remarking that Mrs. Galer ought to see his wife when engaged in spring cleaning; he defied anybody but himself to be successful in recognising her, and at times he did not feel sure until she spoke. Ballard looked in from the passage, where he had been shining his boots, to say that he was off to take night duty, and the men, finding a common bond in the fact that both were uniformed, nodded to each other. Sergeant happened to remark that it looked like rain, and Ballard said a short note from his sister at Marden informed him that the hop-bines needed a wash, whereupon the sergeant, asking first that his soul might be blessed, said, 'Don't tell me you come from Kent!' and the other declaring his inability to give different information without straying from the path of truth, the sergeant announced that he himself came, not exactly from Marden, but from

Goudhurst, which village, it appeared, Ballard knew as he knew the back of his own hand. Ballard, having ten minutes to spare, insisted that the sergeant should come out to the back, where the railway-porter carried on in a small way the task of gardening, hampered by the circumstance that the place was crowded with posts and wire lines and damp, flapping linen; on Sunday mornings it was the custom for everybody in the row to engage in the never-ending task of picking up stones and broken bricks, and throwing them into the garden of neighbours. Upon their return, the sergeant exacted a promise that Ballard would some day see *his* vegetable marrows, and, with a finger at his helmet as salute to the ladies, was going, when Mrs. Galer, rubbing in the starch, and nervous of impending disaster, gave him a reminding word. The sergeant, again asking that his soul might be blessed, expressed fear lest he should next forget his meals, and produced from a wallet a sheet of white paper, and went.

'For that you' (said the sheet of white paper with many capitals) 'residing within the District of the School Board of London and within the said Police District, being the parent of a certain child called Sidney, residing with you within the said Districts respectively, and being not less than Five nor more than Fourteen years of age, did within the six months now last past unlawfully neglect and omit to cause the said Child to attend School, to wit on 23rd November and on divers other days, as required by the Bye-laws of the said School Board

of London.' The wording seemed ambiguous, but the meaning was clear.

'Very fortunate, mind you,' she remarked to the girls. 'Couldn't have 'appened on a better day. Almost looks as though they'd fixed it in order to suit my convenience.'

And at Clerkenwell Police Court a magistrate, with not much time of the afternoon to devote to each case, said it was a pity the boy—now looking affrighted and pale of face—pity the boy did not still possess a father; evidently he was being allowed to run wild; a fine would meet the case now, but if it came before him again he would really have to make an order directing the boy's attendance at the industrial school for a space, where he would be closely looked after. Mrs. Galer, who had taken all the blame, thanked the magistrate, and took her boy's trembling hand. The case of Johnnie Leadbetter followed, and Mrs. Galer remained in court in fulfilment of a promise made to her elderly lodger, who, openly contemptuous of all his relatives, had proclaimed his intention of standing shoulder to shoulder with them in this time of trouble, and, incidentally, taking the occasion to let those in authority see that one man in London, at any rate, could not be trampled upon with impunity. Old Leadbetter, having looked up some of his notes of the sixties, and, having obtained leave of absence from the window of the repairing shop where he worked in full view of a critical public, had come to the court, his lips moving with rehearsal of the opening sentences of his first argument; had declined to

take off his hat, but had been compelled to permit one of the officials to do this for him; had interjected 'Oh, oh!' and 'Question,' to the scandal of even the crowd at the back, and, on the case of his juvenile relative being called, had persisted in stepping up to the witness-box. A fierce argument concerning the taking of the oath; notes on the ledge.

'In the year sixty-seven, sir——'

'Are you the father of the boy now in question?' asked the clerk. A voice from the back of the court supplied the information.

'In the year sixty-seven——'

'Stand down!' said the clerk. 'Call the mother!'

Old Leadbetter gave some of the rest of his speech out in King's Cross Road, and referred to the tyranny of the police; on some bricklayers, seeking incident in their spare moments, chaffing him, he retorted with a pointed allusion to the comparative thickness of their heads and the materials on which they worked; in the result the constables on duty at the wooden gates near the police-station had to come to his rescue and drag him out of reach of the offended crowd. The elaborate preparations for oratory were not, however, entirely wasted, for the Discussion Forum in Farringdon Road announced in its wooden frame as a subject for debate the following Saturday, 'Slave or Master. Which?'

'Of course,' said Mrs. Galer, in discussing the incident, 'I knew the dear boy didn't always go to school when he said he did, but then no more

did I when I was a girl. I s'pose they've become more particular. It's quite true I had the 'B' notice——'

'Don't use a word like that.'

'And I went then to see the managers; but they were so pleasant, I thought it was only a formality. I've had to give him a good talking to, and he's promised faithfully to be a better boy. He said off his multiplication to me last night without a single mistake, and there can't be *much* harm, Miss Jeffrey, in a boy who can say his twelve times.' Miss Jeffrey endeavoured to turn the conversation. 'Yes, I've cleaned it with bread-crumbs, and I've stuck it in the window only this afternoon. Wonder you didn't notice it as you come in; it isn't like you to miss anything.'

They went out to the pavement and inspected the card. 'Furnished Room,' it said, with ornamental flourishes, 'for a Respectable Young Man.'

'Looks all right,' admitted Miss Jeffrey; 'but, with a melancholy shake of the head, 'it may be up for monce and monce. Friend of mine—gone now—she had a first-floor back empty for I don't know how long, but she was particular; wouldn't have single people, and didn't care for marrieds.'

The three girls and the married woman who did the washing and never spoke, came out to ascertain what was engaging interest. They speculated on the probable characteristics of the new lodger, and Milly, the head girl, expressed a hope that, whoever he was, he would use scent for his pocket-handkerchief; nothing made one feel quite so lady-like

as borrowing a few drops of Jockey Club. The other two were in favour of a powerful lavender water, to be obtained in pennyworths in your own bottle from a place in Goswell Road; but Milly declined to alter her opinion. Scent, she said, was a matter of taste; in regard to the perfume favoured by her colleagues, it always reminded her too much of chapel. A tall, spare man, silk-hatted, came across the roadway. Landladies in the street watched his movements with undisguised interest; children playing at Jubilee processions stopped and looked up and, from force of habit more than because they required the information, asked the well-dressed stranger the time.

'He's come for me at last,' said Milly, in affected tones. 'O Gerald, how I 've longed for this moment! Where 'ast thou been all these long dreary years? 'Ast thou forgot that night in June?'

'Indoors at once,' cried the little woman sharply, clapping her hands. 'Don't let me 'ave to speak twice. Idling your time like this! I never 'eard of such a thing. Miss Jeffrey, you mustn't let me detain you.'

'Me time's me own,' remarked that lady as the girls went inside reluctantly and took up fresh irons from the side of the red-hot gas-stove. 'What was I talking about last? Oh, your first-floor back.'

Mrs. Galer went from the doorway of her shop to the door of her house, abrupt departure being the only method of breaking off conversation with

the dressmaker. Without looking round she knew the tall man had stopped.

'Beg pardon,' he said courteously. He rapped with his knuckles on the open door, and she returned. 'Ashamed to trouble you.'

'Don't mention it.'

'Rather want a room,' he said, his hat off, 'a furnished room; a first-floor back, if possible, not overlooked.'

'I have such a room as it 'appens,' she replied precisely. 'As to being overlooked, I use the garden for my laundry business, which I carry on next door, and nobody from either side, without hanging themselves half out of the window——'

'Excellent. Excellent! Any other paying guests? Lodgers, I mean?' Mrs. Galer gave the information. 'On the railway?' he repeated, swinging his thin walking-stick in a dubious, deliberative way.

'A most respectable fellow,' she urged spiritedly. 'I'd trust Mr. Ballard with untold gold—if I'd got it, that is. Where do you work yourself, may I ask?'

For reply he produced a bundle of letters from the inside pocket of his frock-coat. Selected an addressed envelope.

'Spelt, as you see, with a "y." Armytage with a "y."' He placed his silk hat on one of the wooden pegs; he looked older without his hat. 'Don't know Yorkshire at all, I suppose?' he added, looking over her shoulder.

'Only by name.'

'Mine has been a romantic history,' he said thoughtfully; 'put in a book no one would believe it.'

'Don't care much for people with romantic histories.'

'I am now devoting myself to work seriously. But I don't want my people to know.'

'My poor 'usband was very well connected on his mother's side. Her people kept an eating-house in Holborn, where you couldn't get anything under threepence.'

Miss Jeffrey outside gave a cough of impatience at this interpolation of facts, which, for her, lacked the charm of novelty.

'Once your confounded affairs get into Chancery,' he said, slapping his leg with the walking-stick, 'all you can do is to wait. That's partly why I want to stay here quite quietly for a few months. You see?'

'I hear.'

'I have to meet at Euston the train due nine-something. The room is sure to be all right. I'm an old campaigner; anything does for me. Many a night, with no ceiling but the starry skies——'

He shook his head with a reminiscent air.

'Where's your luggage, captain?'

'I may bring it back with me,' he said.

'My Sid could fetch it.'

'Either to-night or some time to-morrow. Depends. I suppose you would like a week's rent in advance?' He searched his pockets.

'You needn't trouble, sir, about that. Would you consider five extravagant?'

'My dear madam,' he said generously, 'whatever

you say is undoubtedly the right figure. I can trust you.'

'And about references, captain?'

'That's the deuce of it,' he said, fencing at the hat-stand. 'Once my friends find my address, they'll be down on me, and I shan't have a moment's peace. They can't understand that a man at times gets tired of society, of dinners, dances, and all the rest of it.' He opened his mouth wearily.

'Ah!' said Mrs. Galer, yawning in sympathy, 'the rich don't 'ave it all their own way.'

'And wants to get off from himself and everybody and think out things quietly. They can't understand it. Or else it is they won't understand it. By the bye, where are the nearest newspaper shops?'

'That sounds like my boy's step. He shall run round the corner and show you. What might you want to know for?'

'I don't know what it is about me exactly,' said the captain, reflectively and puzzled. 'Some men can go about wearing a mask all their lives, but with me, unless I'm absolutely frank and straightforward, then I'm nothing at all. If I'm pretending to be what I'm not, I'm simply miserable.'

'I'm like that, too,' said Mrs. Galer.

He beckoned her mysteriously to the foot of the stairs and whispered.

'Considering what my 'usband's profession was when I married him, I ought to know something about horseflesh.'

'A strange lot,' said the captain, 'and it's my hobby to queer their pitch; you'll forgive the

vulgarity of the phrase. Here you have on the one hand,' he touched the banisters, 'the jockeys and the owners and the goodness knows what all trying to make everything for themselves, and on the other hand,' he touched the wall, 'you have the poor public, interested in sport, wanting to back their fancy, and not knowing any more about it than—than my boots.'

'And they want soleing and 'eeling.'

'This is where *I* come in,' went on the captain confidentially. 'Mind you, I don't pose altogether as a philanthropist; same time I wouldn't do it unless I could feel that I was conferring a benefit on my fellow-man.'

'I must get back to my work,' said the little woman.

'I apologise for taking up so much of your time, but I'm one of those men who, unless they act in a perfectly——'

'You told me.'

'Then what I do is to supply newsagents every morning with slips containing advice in regard to the day's racing. They dispose of them for a mere trifle, we share the proceeds, the buyer acts on the advice contained in the envelope, makes his profit; and thus the working-man is able to find an addition to his income.'

'You're always right, then?' A boy appeared at the doorway.

'Ah!' with enthusiasm, 'so this is your son and heir, is it? Fine sharp lad, too. Got his mother's eyes.'

'You'll never win a cigar *or* a cokernut,' said Johnnie Leadbetter, 'unless you aim straighter than that.'

'Where's Sid? You're not leading him into any more mischief, are you, Johnnie?'

'I like that,' said Johnnie Leadbetter tearfully. 'That's good, that is. Am I leading him into mischief? Any one would think that he had always been a perfect saint, and that I had always been the opposite. Seems to me I get all the kicks and other people get all the 'apence. I shall be jolly well glad when I get grown up; I'll put things a bit square then, I will.'

'*This* is my boy,' remarked Mrs. Galer proudly. Sid came through the passage from the shop reading with so much interest that he forgot the existence of the worn place in the linoleum. 'Up-se-daisy,' said his mother. The captain took his chin and inspected him.

'Cleverish face,' he said. 'Mouth not quite right.'

'You're a bit spotted,' said the boy. He kissed his mother; she put her arm around his neck affectionately.

'And reading what?' asked the captain, taking the boy's book. 'Hullo! Started on Scott already?'

'Schoolmaster recommended it.'

'Just on the very edge of the tournament,' he remarked. '"De Bracy, and other knights attached to Prince John——"'

'Give it here,' said the boy.

'He's at Mr. Bryant's school now,' said Mrs. Galer. She went, but returned at once with a basket, and

Sid, without being asked to do so, took one of the handles. Events were having an effect upon him; a desire to read was but one of the results; his face looked cleaner, and the back of his neck had received attention. The two boys carried the basket of flannels downstairs to the cellar, complaining in an undertone of each other's clumsiness.

'Everything most satisfactory,' remarked the captain.

Here was the latchkey, and if ever the captain came home when the laundry was open he could enter the shop and go into the house through the passage. She hurried upstairs with a clean towel, and on her return found the captain practising new expressions in the small square of mirror framed under the hat-pegs. Miss Jeffrey having, at the risk of catching earache, obtained a good deal of information, and being ever able to round off a story with the aid of imagination, went, giving up all thoughts of work, and devoted the rest of the evening to calls in the neighbourhood. At the last house the captain had become heir-presumptive to an earldom, escaping the troubles and worries natural to one who owned the more valuable parts of a place called Scotland.

Some weeks ere Ballard encountered the new lodger; in the meantime he heard praises sung by Mrs. Galer. The captain never poured his tea into his saucer; the captain rarely ventured out without borrowing an umbrella; the captain had said an encouraging word in regard to the efforts of Ballard in the back garden; the captain had

brought home a heavy portmanteau containing a lot of clothes; the captain was going to get old Leadbetter to alter his dress-suit for him—at present it was rather short in the sleeves; the captain could read like anything; Milly, the head girl, admitted herself deeply in love with him, and was trying to make up her mind to ask him to let her treat him one Monday evening to Collins's, at Islington. The captain gave but little trouble; of course, you could scarcely expect a born gentleman to shine his own boots. The captain had such a pleasant way with him; if anybody had a bit of a cold he never forgot to ask after it, although it was true that he did not always wait for the reply. Very nice to Sid, too.

'Any more news?' asked Ballard.

'The captain——'

'I mean about anybody else. Give him a rest for a bit.'

'Let me see,' said Mrs. Galer, 'you've 'eard me speak about Mrs. Wills over in Judd Street? Well, she's gone at last. I think about doing something for her Janie. There's no relatives worth calling relatives. I think you'll get on all right together, once you meet.'

'She won't be in my way.'

'The captain, I mean.'

'Oh!' cried Ballard explosively. 'Well, I won't say what I was going to say.'

Ballard, on early duty, was tidying up the back garden, dodging underneath the flapping articles of linen, when some small scraps of paper, like stage

snow, descended. Ballard, in blue shirt-sleeves, tweed cap, corduroy trousers, looked up.

'What you playing at up there?' he demanded. 'Hare and 'ounds, or what?'

'I see,' said the captain blandly, from his window, where he was stencilling sheets of paper for posters, 'that you are engaged in the pursuit of horticulture.'

'I shall be engaged in the pursuit of something else,' retorted Ballard heatedly, 'if you litter the place all over like this.'

'On the Midland Railway, aren't you?'

'You keep a civil tongue in your 'ead,' recommended the Great Northern man.

'Haven't such a thing as a little red ink you can lend me, I suppose? No? Sorry.' The captain closed his window.

'I've seen your face somewhere before,' said Ballard, 'and not in church, neither. Under peculiar circumstances of some sort. But I can't'—[a violent dig with the spade] 'quite'—[another dig] —'place you!'

CHAPTER V

EXCEPTING in moments of great excitement, as the presence of a funeral, or a wedding, or a hansom-cab, the street kept its head by day within windows, and if it wanted to see what was going on, peered through Venetian blinds, where a lath sometimes gave way owing to the strain of exercise, remaining a peep-hole for all time. Affrays in Clerkenwell, accounts of which appeared with regularity in the evening papers when political matters proved dull, were never able to give Kimmer Street as an address, and at one or two of the houses bills appeared occasionally giving notice of forthcoming lectures at Congregational chapels. Altogether, with its carefully arranged Virginian creepers growing demurely over the windows, its brass plates (that had been rubbed on so many years of Saturday mornings that it needed sharp sight to tell whether the trade pursued on the first door was that of a clockmaker, or a die-sinker, or an electro-plater or a binder of books) and its general air of reserve, it resembled, in comparison with noisier streets near by, nothing so much as a precise maiden lady of middle age, accustomed to dress herself in neutral colours, and anxious to do

nothing which should attract attention. Even the public-houses at either end conducted themselves in the same spirit, lighting up at night modestly. Consequently the new painting of the Victoria laundry gave to Kimmer Street the air of one wearing around the waist a brilliant sash, and furnished good matter for debate at the first meeting of matrons.

Question number one was: Could she afford it? Decision, come to with regret, that likely enough she could just afford it, and that was about all. An economical person, say what you might; you often saw her in the post-office waiting an opportunity when no neighbours were near the wire cage to pass in underneath her brown-covered book to the lady clerk, together with a piece of gold, and a hopeful remark concerning future weather prospects.

'To give her her doo,' said Number Twenty-Eight, who was providing the tea, 'there 's no doubt she 's got quite ten or twelve pound put by in spite of all she lays out on the business!'

'That I attribute more to good luck than anything,' remarked a guest. 'If I 'd only had good luck I sh'd be able to lay me 'and on money.'

'Works 'ard, mind you. Never still for a moment.'

'I could 'ave worked hard if I 'd liked,' said the other, with pride.

The ladies at the round table passed cups along, and argued this point; eventually a vague but satisfactory compromise was arrived at on a suggestion from the hostess, who said that we were all born

into this world, and we had all to go out of it sooner or later, and meanwhile we had our own notions about how to make the best of it. Twenty-Two became reminded of a sister-in-law who had married money, and lived in half a house instead of being content with two rooms and a scullery, and was giving herself airs in consequence; Twenty-Two was anxious to give an imitation of the new manner assumed by this relative, but the hostess, determined to keep the debate from straggling, called attention to, as it were, the next item on the agenda. Was Mrs. Galer bringing up that boy of hers properly? Hostess, in order to start discussion, suggested that the police court warning had done no great harm; something or other had certainly made a wonderful alteration in him. On the previous morning, before going to his new school, which he attended regularly, the Galer boy had undertaken an errand for her ('Tisn't often,' remarked the hostess, 'I run out of eggs'), accepting the farthing paid for the task with a polite word of thanks. Moreover, Mrs. Leadbetter, coming out of The Dew Drop as the hostess was going in ('She'd got mild and bitter; I was fetching stout and bitter,' remarked the hostess as a piece of confirmatory evidence), had said that her Johnnie had told her that a master was taking Sid Galer in hand, and meant to make something of him.

'She's brought him up wrong,' declared Twenty-Two. ('Did you put two lumps in mine? Tastes as though there was only one.) Do you know that

she told me she'd never give him a real proper thrashing once in the 'ole course of his life? You mustn't tell me that to simply stand them in the corner is the way to treat children.'

'Spoil the rod and——'

'I've brought up six,' went on the woman from Twenty-Two heatedly, 'and I ought to know what I'm talking about. Yes,' in reply to a comment, 'and I *do* know what I'm talking about. I ain't like some. Some don't know when they're talking or when they've left off.'

'You were saying,' remarked the hostess soothingly.

'The way to bring up children,' said the other, 'is simply to punish them—punish them well whenever you've got a moment or two to spare.'

Dealing with the general topic of education, the ladies of Kimmer Street held the opinion that much of it was likely to make youngsters too big for their boots; one had had to lose her temper, she said, with her eldest girl, because the eldest girl had corrected her in regard to St. Petersburg, hitherto looked upon as one of the characters from the New Testament. 'For once you let them contradict you,' said this woman, 'and you're done for.' Others were in favour of reading and writing and sums, and of stopping there definitely; a knowledge of these arts sometimes made children useful to you when they grew up; anything beyond gave them the intolerable conceit of being better than their parents. Summing up, the hostess, quite in the manner of the chairman at the Sessions House not far off, said

that it seemed to her that youngsters, when all was said and done, were at once a blessing and a curse. Next, please.

'Fortunate to be able to let as she does.'

They did not envy Mrs. Galer the possession of old Leadbetter. Leadbetter, after exhausting the entire list of his relatives, had quarrelled his way through many houses of the neighbourhood; his habit of slamming doors was the least of all his defects as a lodger. Talk? Men had the habit of charging their women-folk with fluency of speech; it was agreed by those who had acted as landlady to Leadbetter that he was capable of talking a donkey's hind legs off. And the things he would say about Royalty, too.

'I used to wonder,' declared a guest, in awed tones, 'that the ceiling didn't fall in.'

Ballard! Good lodger enough, as lodgers went. Not what you could call a free and an open-handed one; rather close, as a matter of fact. Made very good money up at King's Cross, but husbands reported of him that if they happened by chance to find him anywhere taking his glass, Ballard was never the man to say, 'Well, what's yours?' Worse than that, if invited on a Saturday to join in a flutter for drinks round, Ballard would reply, in his unsociable way, 'Thanks, I only want one'; would thereupon put down his twopence, drink up, give a general nod, and go. The circumstance that Ballard was over thirty and still a bachelor was held to be evidence of inexcusable selfishness; some of the ladies went so far as to say that every man

ought to be compelled by law to get married. Miss Jeffrey, the dressmaker, who, not being present, could be referred to without reserve, had, goodness knew, given him hints that were broad enough and not too deep, but she might as well have tried to encourage the Holborn Town Hall. Miss Jeffrey, in an endeavour not to be outdone by the bright blueness of her friend's laundry, had, it appeared, not only changed the coloured pictures of ladies almost divided at the waist that decorated her window, but had bought for herself a second-hand brass plate with the words Madame Somebody, costumier; the ladies at the table sighed as the tea grew weaker, and hoped this would not give the street a bad name.

The captain.

'Ah!' sighed the guests enviously.

'That isn't one of your Nature's gentlemen,' said the hostess. ('Don't be afraid of taking the last piece of cake, some one.) That's the real sort.'

'Always a pleasant smile.'

'Steps off the pavement rather than run up against you.'

'Seldom without a cigar stuck in his face.'

'Gets shaved every day.'

'Never counts his change.'

'And with all that,' remarked the hostess, 'with all that, never letting anybody think that he's superior to those round about him. I 'appen to know'—the hostess assumed a look of mystery—'that he asked a certain person to go with him to the Grand, at Islington, one evening.' An impres-

sive pause. 'She wouldn't go. Absolutely refused to go.'

'More fool her!'

'Why don't she get married again?' demanded Number Twenty-Two in aggrieved tones. 'That's what I want to know. I don't think it's right for her to remain as she is. She ought to 'ave her troubles same as any one else.'

'If it comes to that,' pointed out the hostess judicially, 'she's had her share, one way and the other. You 'eard, I suppose, that she'd had a tombstone put up over him.' The ladies confessed reluctantly that this information had not until this moment reached them. 'Oh, I must tell you about that. What do you think she's had put on it? Guess, now!' They shook their heads, declaring inability. '"A fond 'usband,"' she quoted, with gloomy relish, '"fond 'usband and a devoted father"!'

The guests pushed back chairs, and, unable to find words to express their feelings, gazed blankly at each other and clicked tongues. The hostess dusted crumbs from her broad lap, looked hard at a tea-stain on her best tablecloth, and enjoying the triumph of those who furnish exclusive intelligence, repeated the quotation.

'What I mean to say——' began Number Twenty-Two.

'You don't remember him, Mrs. What-is-It,' said the hostess to one of her guests, 'you're fresh. And you don't either, Mrs. I-Forget-Your-Name, because you're a comparative stranger, too. But the rest of

you—— Well!' despairingly, 'it's a funny world. If the next one's anything like it, I shall say something.'

'Went to her place the other Saturday evening,' said the comparative stranger, anxious to assert her position, 'to fetch my parcel, and I 'appened to mention in the course of gen'ral conversation that I shouldn't be sorry when my old man made up his mind to go—it costs me fourpence every time I go to the 'ospital—and she turned round on me, and "Oh," she says, "don't talk like that. If you only knew how I miss Galer. He was such a 'andy man to 'elp with the business," she says. 'Yes,' repeated the comparative stranger, 'those were her very words. I 'appened in the course of gen'ral conversation——'

'Well,' said Twenty-Two, looking with a sigh at the empty plates on the table, 'I s'pose we'd better see about going.'

'They say it's bad for you to 'urry,' remarked the hostess, 'directly after a meal.'

'That's after a 'earty meal,' said Twenty-Two.

Characteristic of Kimmer Street that all had come in hats and bonnets; the woman from next door wore a heavily beaded dolman, but this, as the others said privately, was because it was new. 'New to *her!*' added the others precisely. They took turns now at the looking-glass over the mantelpiece, which came short of that point of perfection which one expects to find in a mirror, for it lengthened every face that looked into it, something in the manner of a caricaturist, so that folk who went to it

in bright-hearted mood turned away sad and disconsolate. This feeling increased on the present occasion, when the hostess gave information that Mrs. Galer had given up a full half-hour the previous evening to the work of fitting on in Miss Jeffrey's front room. Some one remarked bitterly that it might be assumed that Mrs. Galer was having something to match the colour of her shop. Criticism broke out anew with an increased note of acerbity.

'She's one of those people that never seems to want to ask any one's advice.'

'Goes and does things without saying so much as a single word.'

'If I'd been her, I should 'ave come to me and I should 'ave said, "So and so's the case: what d'you think about me doing so and so?" Instead of which——'

'Why can't she open on Sunday mornings?'

'Does the work of two women rolled into one. Any sensible person would find the la'ndry itself a pretty tidy 'andful; but, no! Must needs run her 'ouse next door and do all the rooms herself, and——'

'The least she might do is to get some 'elp.'

'She ought to keep a servant.'

'Apart from all of which, it's ridiculous for a woman who's gone through what she's gone through to always look so 'appy and cheerful. It's too much like defying Providence.'

'*I'm* not sure that it isn't downright wicked. I don't pretend to be over and above religious meself, but I know where to draw the line.'

'My old man come 'ome the other evening, and I was feeling a bit low because my sister-in-law had been to call on me, and so I didn't answer him, you see, when he told me about a row he'd had with his foreman, and suddenly he turns round — it isn't often he dares talk to me in that tone of voice—and he says, "I wonder you don't try to be merry and bright like Mrs. Galer over the way," he says. I felt so mad, I could 'ave flung something at him. Because,' tearfully, 'as a matter of fact I *am* merry and I *am* bright, and I defy anybody to say I 'm not. If I 've got a fault, it is that I 'm sensitive. Goo'-bye all.'

The guests did not leave together, because to do this would have marred the best points of the game. Thus the tearful lady having departed, the others discussed her in detail, and when another left she, in her turn, had to be considered, the whole business having some resemblance to a series of post-mortem examinations. This was probably the reason why Twenty-Two and Twenty-Two's special friend (for the current week) stayed on to the last, each hoping that the other would leave, and unable to bear the thought that the treatment she had meted out to the rest should be administered to her. Each said farewell several times and went to the door, holding the porcelain knob for a while and ever coming back to the fireplace with an 'Oh! and I forgot to tell you——' and 'You must 'ear this bit,' and 'If you 'll promise not to breathe a single word to a soul——' and other reopening phrases of a similar kind. The hostess gave hints, suggesting that their

respective husbands must surely be home by this time, and would, in that case, be waiting for a meal, and, as this had no effect, followed with the remark that her own man would arrive directly, and he never cared to see visitors about. This also failing, the hostess begged them to accompany her into the passage and see where the damp was coming in. The two ladies had suspicions, but they were compelled to accept the invitation, and, once in the passage, they found the front door already open; the hostess, by an adroit movement, shunted them to the step. A halt took place there, and a further stop occurred outside, animated chatter going on the while, each lady keeping one foot on the sill. The hostess had decided to take action, when from the house at the side of the newly painted Victoria Laundry she observed a tall girl come, aproned and hatless. Attention being directed to this circumstance, the two withdrew suddenly.

'Why, that's young Janie Wills who lost her mother.'

'If that woman Mrs. Galer hasn't had the cool audacity to take her on to 'elp with the 'ouse!'

They turned to review the case with their hostess in its new light.

'She needn't have shut the door in our very face,' remarked Twenty-Two bitterly. '*That's* not ladylike!'

CHAPTER VI

'CERTAINLY, my dear Mrs. Galer,' said the captain, in his courteous tones. 'By all means, if you wish it.'

'He'll only potter about in that back garden of mine,' she remarked. 'It's a bit like trying to grow things on a pavement.'

'I've great respect for Ballard,' declared the captain, making fencing passes at nothing with his walking-stick. 'Most estimable character. One of those men who preserve our country's reputation for indomitable doggedness.'

'He wanted to keep one when he came first,' said Mrs. Galer, 'but I rather objected to animals about the place. I'll go and call him.'

Ballard, entering from the garden, half in mufti, half in uniform, demanded to know who had been leaving him money now. Mrs. Galer said, did he know that to-day was Bank Holiday? Ballard replied that he knew it to his cost; threepence amassed in two separate sums represented all that he had made at the station that morning. If many days were like this he would be inclined to put in for a signalman's job away in the country. Mrs. Galer said there was nothing gained by giving

in, and that, talking of the country, what did Mr. Ballard say to giving the captain and herself the pleasure of his company to Hampstead Heath for the afternoon. King's Cross man pointed out that this would necessitate something in the nature of a sluice down and a shining of boots; he feared he should be keeping them waiting. The answer to this was permission to take ten minutes, with an added direction from Mrs. Galer to hurry up, and make himself good-looking with all convenient despatch.

'And what about you, Sid?' She called up the stairs: 'Coming with us to the 'Eath, or staying at home?'

'Rather a common sort of place, isn't it, mother?'

'Won't be when we get there.'

'I've arranged to call at Mr. Bryant's, mother. He's going to give me an hour with history.'

'Do you think you can look after the 'ouse, Janie Wills?'

'I'll see nobody runs away with it,' said the tall girl.

'He's a queer boy,' said the little woman, almost laughing with content, as the captain insisted on fastening the one button of her glove. 'Changed so the last few months, you wouldn't credit. Pitched into me yesterday afternoon like anything for not helping Janie Wills first. I pretend to understand what he's talking about when he speaks of his lessons; but generally I can only 'alf guess what he's driving at. It's Mr. Bryant says this, and

Mr. Bryant says that, and Mr. Bryant says the other; he's having a wonderful influence.'

A proud person as, escorted by her two lodgers, she tripped along in the direction of Gray's Inn Road. The day in Clerkenwell was marked by closed shops (Mrs. Galer about the only woman who had worked that morning), by detachments of young men with mouth organs, by rows of girls with coloured frills around their hats affecting to be exhilarated. Many of these did not leave the half-dozen streets which they knew best, and each sex preferred to associate with its similars. Children, having only the roadway for playground, went about looking for mischief with the bored air of those who, having expended their money allowance too early in the day, are half inclined to wish that school was open. At the corners of streets the sentimental air holding town for the month was being sung, and efforts made to force it to serve as melody for a dance:—

'Do not grieve because I 'm gowing far across the sea,
Leaving poor old Engeland for many and many a day.
Say goo'-bye to mother——'

'Don't know when I've been out on a Bank 'Oliday before. Generally make it a day to do a bit of sorting and general clearing up.'

'My own opinion, if you will allow me to say so, is that you work too hard,' said the captain, inclining his head. 'What do *you* think, Ballard?'

'Want to know?'

'That was the reason I inquired.'

'Well,' said the railway-man, 'as you've asked

for it, you may as well 'ave it. In my opinion it's necessary some should make a bit of overtime to make up for those who don't do enough.'

'I work with my head, Ballard.'

'P'r'aps you 're wise, then, not to overtax yourself.'

'Now, now,' said Mrs. Galer, giving him a tap with her umbrella; 'quarrelling the first thing.'

'Defy anybody to do that,' said Ballard, 'when they're with you.'

'Mr. Ballard,' she explained to the captain, 'doesn't deal in soft soap. Only in good, hard mottled.'

The captain did not speak again until they reached the tram-lines. There he reasserted himself by ordering them to jump on a car going to Holborn, and they did so, protesting; on seeing the crowd waiting at the terminus to board the car, Mrs. Galer freely admitted the wisdom of this strategy. The captain had many attractive habits, and one that counted well for popularity was a smart readiness to pay. Ballard, anxious to show that he claimed one-half of the responsibility of taking out Mrs. Galer, endeavoured to forestall, but the other was more than his match, and Ballard found presently that he had to relinquish his efforts. Discovered also that the captain was an alert man; whatever question the little woman put, the answer came at once; Ballard knew the information was not always precise and correct, but he envied the swiftness with which it was given. Now came his turn to become silent, and up the crowded hill, when the car had stopped

at the terminus, he followed the two, frowning at Mrs. Galer's invitation to keep in step. A burly man seized his arm and begged him to come inside a small booth and do a little with his fists; Ballard took the request in ill-part, and the boxing-man went rubbing his shoulder and bewailing the roughness of the world. They turned to the right that they might escape the dense, slowly moving crowd. Mrs. Galer, a busy woman and a Londoner, had seen few of the sights of London (she had been promising herself since childhood to some day take the bull by the horns and go to see St. Paul's Cathedral), and the present scene had for her attraction. A piano organ, carefully muted that its music might not be borrowed by those out of reach of the collecting cap, played, and here the sharp division of sex was again marked; girls danced together, young men danced together, the latter hiding awkwardness by desperate endeavours to excite hilarity.

'Past it,' replied Mrs. Galer, shaking her head. 'You 've no idea, captain, how old I am.'

'I know how young you look.'

'Wrong side of thirty, and chance it!'

'Twenty-nine you mean?' They walked on, stopping, however, every few minutes to watch some fresh incident; when they came round to the double row of shows and stalls, then it was impossible to move with any pretence of hurry. The Largest Lady in the World (of goodly proportions, but undeniably sulky), the Calf with Two Heads (the second head not really a head, and the animal generally bearing but little resemblance to the attractive

picture outside); Terrible Scenes of the Great Fulham Murder (a peepshow, hotly patronised, with rather disappointing pictures snipped from the *Police News*); the Champion Zulu Warrior, with his Native War Dance (slightly bemused, and on maudlin terms with his proprietor), all these and many more were thrust upon their attention by hoarse-voiced men and women, who took it as a personal affront if any went by without giving patronage; and, indeed, the captain was so determined to make the day a success that he insisted on taking the party into nearly all, Mrs. Galer enjoying herself without reserve. Ballard looked on with the cautious eye of the countryman determined not to be taken in by Londoners: he put aside some of the reserve on applying his efforts with conspicuous success to a try-your-strength machine.

'Ere's a lark,' whispered the little woman to her two squires. 'My girls. Let's watch and see what they're up to.'

The three young men who belonged to the girls marched dutifully in a row behind them; now and again one of the ladies jerked a remark over her shoulder, and the three did their best to cap it with a retort. Arriving at a circle where a thick skipping-rope was being whirled by two hot-faced men, a halt was called. Milly went first, and to her great confusion found herself out of practice; the crowd gave their criticisms freely, and Milly, warm with disappointment, told them all that if they were not careful she would force them to laugh

on the other side of their mouths. The honour of the party was retrieved by the performance given by the other two; they jumped rhythmically, their eyes gazing steadily into space. When presently they screamed:

'Vinegar!

'Mustard!

'Pepper!'

as commands to quicken the pace they still managed to avoid entanglement. The crowd clapped hands approvingly, and the attendant youths appeared to share the honours given.

'We won't let them see us,' said Mrs. Galer acutely. 'I'll have such a barney about it with 'em this week. Wonder whether we shall come across anybody else we know? You must be acquainted with a lot of people, captain.'

'My friends are, I am afraid, not likely to be encountered here on a day like this.'

'Expect you'd feel much more at 'ome in the West End than you do with us in Clerkenwell?'

'It does one no harm,' he said, flourishing his walking-stick, 'to come in contact with the masses.'

'You hit the masses in the eye,' said Ballard warningly, 'and you'll find some 'arm done to you.'

'Our friend,' remarked the captain tolerantly, 'seems to be in constant fear of trouble.'

'Not for meself,' said the railway-man.

It was, perhaps, at tea that the captain scored most successfully. Ballard had suggested a cottage where notices said that a family pot of tea could be obtained for threepence; the captain waved this

aside magnificently and conducted them through a crowd standing outside an hotel; through another crowd that had packed itself in the passage, in the hope of obtaining refreshment, and upstairs. There, under a steel engraving of Wellington at the battle of Waterloo, he took the head of a table, with Mrs. Galer on his right hand near the window, whence, in luxurious comfort, she could see a stout gentleman below, who, having been tied up with a stout cord, was now refusing to make any attempt to extricate himself until the lookers-on had thrown into the circle another three-halfpence; easy to identify the faces of those who, having already given, now looked resentfully at less generous neighbours. Against the high brick wall two determined, large-featured women in muslin dresses, scarlet feathered hats, and armed with banjos, waited haughtily until the stout gentleman should see fit to terminate his performance, and give them the chance of engaging public attention.

'Let Mr. Ballard be mother,' suggested Mrs. Galer.

'I'm no great 'and at pouring out,' he urged.

'Come,' said the captain, 'the requests of the fair sex cannot be lightly disregarded. My dear Mrs. Galer, can I tempt you with some water-cress? Waiter, why the deuce isn't the salt on the table?' The waiter, tipping back his straw hat, replied that the salt-cellar was near enough to the captain to bite him. 'Bring another,' ordered the captain royally. 'Hang it all, one doesn't often take a lady out.'

The clumsiness of Ballard excited the interest of parties at other tables in the long room; the captain lost no opportunity of drawing attention to every slip, and young couples ceased stroking each other's hands in order to stand up and watch. Mrs. Galer declared that for such a man there was but one fate in store; he would certainly have to find some one willing to marry him. Perceiving a retort slowly germinating in the mind of the railway-man, she spoke of Miss Jeffrey, of that lady's previous failures, of the usefulness of a wife who could make her husband's clothes, turning him out always in the latest Paris fashion. Ballard listened to her, eating away stolidly, folding three pieces of the thin bread and butter in order to save time. He glowered dangerously, however, when the captain took a hand. One of the banjo women outside suddenly joined her colleague in the second half of the chorus of the only song desired by the people that day.

'Nearly over that time, captain,' warned Mrs. Galer.

The captain had indeed started violently at the sound of the voice. He turned to look out of the window, and drew back quickly, but not before the woman in muslin had sent up from the wall a look of recognition.

'Say goo'-bye to mother, tell her that I love her,
Tell her that I did not mean the words that I did say.'

Mrs. Galer hummed the air in unison with the singing below.

'Charming voice you have,' declared the captain.

'Waiter, is there any means of getting out of this place presently without going through the front door?'

'Yes,' said the waiter. 'By jumping out of the window.'

'But we want to go out the back way, my man.'

'What you want to do,' said the waiter precisely, 'and what you're going to do is two different things. You'll have to depart the way you come in.'

As the captain decreased in vivacity, so Ballard improved. By speaking on equal terms to the waiter he was favoured with more milk; the waiter, still smarting under the first form of treatment, said to Ballard confidentially that he could always distinguish between a man and half a man, apologising for previous curtness by pointing out the worry of keeping one eye inside the house and one eye outside. Mrs. Galer complimented Ballard on increase of dexterity that had come from practice, and the young couples at other tables, giving up all hope of obtaining further amusement at his expense, resumed the stroking of hands.

'Ballard,' said the captain suddenly, 'a word with you. Waiter, the bill!'

'You don't want no bill,' replied the waiter. 'Pay cash if you want to keep out of trouble.'

'You *will* excuse us, Mrs. Galer? Just one moment, Ballard.'

When Ballard returned from the private consultation near the other window he said curtly to Mrs. Galer that she was to come with him; the captain would catch them up after he had settled, if they walked leisurely along the road that led across to

Highgate. Alone with her, the railway-man seemed, comparatively speaking, at his ease; and, when Mrs. Galer remarked that the captain appeared to be a long time, Ballard suggested he was possibly having a six-round contest with the waiter. The little woman declared she was having a rare fine outing; she anticipated some trouble in settling down to work again at nine on Tuesday morning. Talking of business, what did Mr. Ballard think of the building of an outhouse in the garden? The work increased weekly, and something would have to be done. The cellar next door was a place on which she had fixed her thoughts; that could be managed easily. Ballard replied by demanding what was the good of asking advice when she had no doubt already made up her mind what she should do. Seemed to him that she would never be satisfied until she got a steam laundry and called herself Galer and Co.

'And Son,' she said correctingly, looking thoughtfully across the Heath. In the distance people went about the space like flies; the grunting, bellowing steam-organs sounded at this interval of space almost musical. 'Galer and Son. That's my ambition.'

In the fear that she had talked too much about herself, she asked presently when they found a disengaged end of a long wooden seat (the other end occupied by a young couple exchanging loud, resonant kisses) whether he seemed any nearer to obtaining that guard's place of which he had sometimes spoken. Ballard answered that to get on in

this world, and especially in railway life, you needed influence (which he had not), you needed push (nobody had ever accused him of this); sometimes necessary to pretend you really liked the taste of blacking. Mrs. Galer argued against some of these propositions, saying that, taking a general view, one man had as good chances as others; easy enough to neglect chances, and afterwards assert that you had never had any. If she were in Ballard's place she would make it a point to attain the distinction of keeping smarter in appearance than any of the rest, and to write out a memorandum whenever a vacancy occurred; always the possibility of having a promotion accorded by the authorities in a desperate hope of saving themselves from further trouble. Ballard should also, if he did not mind further counsel, should also look about him and see if he could not find some nice, bright——

'We'd better be getting back,' he interrupted, becoming restive. 'Seems as though he's been and lost himself.'

People were running in the direction of the space in front of the hotel. No one knew what was happening, but every one bore a hopeful look as though wishful for the sight of disaster or entertainment of some kind. The organised joys were beginning to pall, and anything in the shape of unexpected incident received welcome. Away on the eastern and on the southern side of the wide space the flies travelled to this point with despatch.

'But you can't get through,' Ballard replied.

'I want to know what's going on.'

'That's like you Londoners. Stop 'ere and I'll force me way and come back and tell you all about it. But, mind you don't let any one talk to you.'

'That's like you country-people,' she said.

Ballard, on his return, appeared to have found the task one of difficulty, for his hat was awry, his necktie loosened; one or two attempts had been made to relieve him of the responsibility of carrying a well-secured silver watch. Only a row between a man and a woman, after all, he explained, as he endeavoured to restore sanity to his appearance. Just an ordinary slanging match in which, as usual, the woman appeared to be getting the best of it.

'I can hear her voice,' remarked Mrs. Galer interestedly, 'but I can't hear his. What are they both like to look at?'

Ballard admitted he was no hand at giving descriptions; the man was apparently a gentleman and the woman—well, not exactly a lady, although she had a very fine flow of language; in her actions she was somewhat hampered by a banjo. The inner circle of the crowd encouraged new efforts; short people on the outside made ineffectual attempts to look over the shoulders of those in front of them, and turning away, sighed despondently.

'All this time,' said Mrs. Galer, 'no news of our captain.'

'There'll be a rush for the trams,' said Ballard curtly. 'Best we can do is to get away and see what the chances are of getting a seat.'

'And not look about and try——'

'Surely we can manage to live on for a while without him.'

Civil war at the tramway terminus; the two decided to walk all the way home. Mrs. Galer chattered brightly, and Ballard, content to listen, interposed only an occasional, 'Oh, did she?' and 'What 'appened after that?' and other polite inquiries and ejaculations. Kimmer Street had the look of being touched now with the spirit of holiday; there was singing behind some of the Venetian blinds; the heavy tramp of dancing: here and there the groan of an harmonium called upon to produce light-hearted melody. Janie Wills, waiting at the open door, waved a long arm as she saw them turn the corner.

'Sid asked me to say,' cried the girl, 'that he'd gone out in his best clothes, and he hoped you wouldn't mind. Very nice he looked, too,' she added.

'A year ago,' said Mrs. Galer, contentedly, to her companion, 'he would have been into mischief on a day like this.'

'And old Mr. Leadbetter come home and had his tea, and said he was sick and tired of seeing the working-classes enjoy themselves when they ought to be organising, and he's gone off to bed.'

'We've had a rare time, Janie,' said Mrs. Galer, 'and now I must set about and do some work. Feel as though I've been leading the life of a countess in her own right. Help me off with me cape, and let's see about supper.'

'Can't you rest yourself for a bit?' demanded Ballard.

He went upstairs, and, being absorbed in thought, took the first white door-knob that he came to, and in the half-light went in. There was a deep cupboard in the corner of each bedroom of the house, and Ballard, feeling his way round, took his keys and opened it. On lighting a match and attempting to hang up his coat he found the cupboard full, and this informed him that he had stopped on the first landing instead of the second. 'I shall 'ave to get me friends to put me away soon,' said Ballard reproachfully. The match burned out to his fingers, and he lighted another because the cupboard door would not close.

Mrs. Galer called presently to say that supper was ready. He went to the stairs and shouted that he felt like a lay down; would she mind keeping his warm in the oven? The agreeable scent of a well-done steak rolled upstairs to him; but he sat on the captain's bed waiting and thinking. Presently a latchkey turned in the lock of the street door below.

'Mind you, Janie,' said Mrs. Galer, 'it's very nice when your lodgers are friendly and pleasant with each other. I've known cases——'

'We took in two,' said Janie Wills shrilly, 'when I was a bit of a girl. They were brothers, and they never left off quarrelling from Monday morning till Saturday night. Sundays, of course, they stopped in their beds the best part of the day.'

'A bit stand-offish with each other at the start, but evidently they're on good enough terms now.' The deep tones of the two men's voices rumbled on

overhead. 'You'll find it very pleasant, Janie, when you grow up—that's where I miss poor Galer—to have a young man to take you about.'

'Wonder what time Sid will be coming home?'

'You look well in your black,' said Mrs. Galer, stopping her work for a moment. 'Great consolation, when you've lost a relative, to think that, after all, black suits you. Same time, I dare say you miss your mother.'

'Should, if it wasn't for you.'

Mrs. Galer went round the table and patted the girl's hand comfortingly. Songs outside in the street mingled with the deep-voiced talking overhead; they went to the front room to look out. The girls of the laundry were going by, their young men still following silently and dutifully. The girls sang with the occasional quavering by which the Londoner expresses sentiment:—

'Do not grieve because I 'm gowing far across the sea,
Leaving poor old Engeland——'

'If ever I found a sweetheart,' said Janie thoughtfully, 'I should like him to be clever.'

'As a rule, Janie, my dear, you 'ave to take what you can get.'

'I 'm not clever myself, and I should have all the more respect for him if *he* was. He'd have to be very careful about his aitches——'

'Sometimes my boy speaks so well,' said Mrs. Galer, 'that I don't know what he's saying. And now and again he comes out with a long word that makes me see that there 's more in education than some people like to admit.'

'And clean shaven,' went on the girl dreamily, 'but I'm not quite sure about that. Cleverness would be the principal thing. Means everything nowadays. I made sure I was going to get that scholarship, but—— There's Number Eighteen's husband going in his doorway, or trying to. He always feels the effect of the sun if there's any of it about.'

'Poor Galer used to enjoy his Bank Holidays so.'

'Oh, do look,' begged the girl. 'That's three tries he's had already; 'pon me word it's enough to make a cat laugh.'

'It's the one thing,' said Mrs. Galer, 'that doesn't amuse me. Only makes me think. There's Sid. Run like a shot, and answer the door quick. He mustn't be kept waiting for the world.'

The boy gave his bundle of books to Janie Wills and his cap to his mother. In the back room he took the easy-chair and extended his boots. Mrs. Galer began to tell him of the experiences of the day, but he corrected her phrasing so often that she gave up the attempt, and, having put on his slippers for him, knelt at the fireplace, listening respectfully, and watching the contents of the oven. Mr. Bryant seemed well satisfied with his progress, and had told Mrs. Bryant (whose sister had told Sid) that the lad was as sharp as any he had had the good fortune to encounter; a pleasure to help him. Mrs. Bryant intended giving a musical evening at Tufnell Park, and had asked him to favour them with his company.

'And take me, Sid?' inquired his mother.

In regard to the evening referred to, it would be a select affair; if he possessed a suit of evening clothes he would wear it; what bothered him just now was the question whether he could make a compromise by wearing with his Sunday things a white dress-tie.

'The captain will advise you best about that, dear,' said his mother. 'He's moved in the best circles, and he knows just what's the right thing to do. But he doesn't seem to know when to come down to supper.'

She took the poker, and stepping on a chair, tapped at the ceiling. The bass voices stopped at once.

'That's understood then!' said Ballard sharply on the stairs.

'Yes,' replied the captain slowly, 'I suppose so!'

'First opportunity, mind. And go a good way off.'

'You two have been a long time talking over the 'Ome Rule Bill,' cried Mrs. Galer. 'Is Gladstone right, or is he—— Why, where's the captain, Mr. Ballard?'

'Gone out!' replied Ballard shortly. 'Gone for a quiet stroll round. Out of my chair, kiddie!'

CHAPTER VII

MRS. GALER'S desire that her lodgers should keep on good terms with each other was almost as great as her wish that her boy and the business should prosper; and, the day's work of steam and stress over, nothing pleased her more than to take chair by the table in the kitchen, with her darning-basket near, see old Mr. Leadbetter on one side of the fireplace, the captain in the easiest chair at the other side of the fireplace, Ballard away somewhere outside the circle of light furnished by the shaded oil-lamp. Ballard interposed but rarely; he was the first to admit that when he did speak he generally said the wrong thing, and more than once Mrs. Galer had had to reprove him for a maladroit remark. The other two were fluent men; the captain especially had a luxurious method of speech that clouded his meaning, increasing the little woman's reverence for the educated mind, and causing her to deplore her own defects in this regard. 'For nothing,' as she remarked to Janie Wills, when they tried afterwards to identify by the aid of Barclay's Dictionary (reached by the removal of two photograph frames, a piece of white coral, and A Present from South-

end), 'nothing startles me so much as meeting a word I 'aven't been introduced to.'

The captain was always on the edge of fulfilling his promise to Ballard, and when he spoke of a return to the West End and congenial society, Ballard brightened and gave a sharp, encouraging nod; but Mrs. Galer urged there could be no necessity for haste, and whilst agreeing that he might discover a more imposing address, argued that nowhere could he be more comfortable. The contents of the cupboard had been taken off privately, and the empty portmanteaus disposed of at a marine store-shop which knew how to restrain curiosity; the captain now left the door ostentatiously open, and assured Ballard that henceforward his duties would consist of the picking out of winners, and the picking out of winners alone. In this, as in every other profession, came the ruthless crowding of competition. At small newspaper shops in the neighbourhood windows were filled with slips of exultant self-commendation, written by men who, oddly enough, bore names resembling closely those of successful jockeys or notable trainers; stencil-printed posters demanded to know 'Who Gave Quicksand for the Lincolnshire?' and made other inquiries, answered by the words—

'WE
CAN'T
MAKE
A MISTAKE!'

The cool mind, inspecting these excited advertise-

ments, and seeing the anxiety of the patrons confronted with six confident and immaculate prophets, might wonder why those gifted with such valuable foresight were so good as to sell their results in sealed envelopes for twopence, and why they did not rather amass fortunes by themselves backing the horses; it seemed unreasonable when one saw the men who supplied the envelopes to accuse them of freehanded philanthropy. A rough set, hoarse of voice, scarlet of face, and extravagantly lurid in speech; the captain scored over them in the shops superintended by women because of his excellent manners. He was not popular with the other men, but they accepted his decision when an owner gave to a horse some name in a language with which they were not acquainted. 'A dashed tough life of it we lead as it is,' they complained when these difficulties arose, 'without 'aving to dashed well dislocate our dashed dashed jor!' Sometimes those differences of opinion that will occur between men who wish to gain a livelihood without working for it separated them from those who devoted themselves to crime; more often the relations were friendly. When a boxing-match took place, attracting them all, Sergeant Swanson—a prejudiced officer, perhaps—used to say that a couple of years' hard labour served out to every man jack of the lot would entail nothing that could be called a miscarriage of justice. The captain, anxious to propitiate Ballard, offered the railway-man some special information: Ballard replied brusquely that he had at times assisted in despatching special trains to Alexandra Park.

'Mrs. Galer,' cried the captain, his hat off as he entered the shop door one evening, 'I think I am entitled to claim your congratulations.' She looked up, startled.

'Who's the lady, captain?' asked Milly, the head girl.

'The female mind,' he said, accepting the chair which Mrs. Galer brought forward. He gave it a twist, and, sitting down, leaned his elbows on the top of the chair. 'The female mind is unable to rid itself of the impression that it is love, and love alone, that makes the world go round.' The girls, simpering, told him with gratification that they wanted none of his nonsense. 'I have brought off this afternoon one of the greatest *coups* that has been heard of in the annals of the turf.'

'Glad to hear it,' said Mrs. Galer, after searching for a safe remark. 'Very glad indeed. Girls, you can work and listen at the same time. You don't iron with your ears, do you?'

'I selected Belle Étoile,' remarked the captain, flicking the ash from his cigar.

'Fancy that!'

'A thirty-three to one chance. And backed it myself. My envelopes will be fourpence each to-morrow.'

'Who told you it was going to win, captain?' asked Milly, with respect.

'Simply an omen. Last night there was only one star visible in the sky.'

'I dare say,' said Mrs. Galer admiringly, 'that it's easy enough once you get the trick of it, but I

should no more know how to put two and two together like that than I should know how to fly.'

'It requires the active mind,' he admitted.

'Supposing there hadn't been a star in the sky last night,' asked Milly. 'Wouldn't——'

'I'm six pounds odd to the good,' he said, interrupting, 'and I want to mark the occasion. Now, let me see, there's you, Mrs. Galer, there's myself and one, two, three; that makes five altogether. No use bothering about the others. I've ordered a carriage for seven o'clock.'

'I'd rather go out in a yacht,' said Milly. 'Make it a yacht, captain. Let's have a steam yacht each.'

'I s'pose it's understood,' said the third girl satirically, 'that we dine at a fashionable restaurant.'

He bowed. 'I propose to give myself the pleasure of acting as your host.'

'You can't kid us,' remarked the girls knowingly. 'We weren't born on the first of April.'

'But,' said the little woman, 'you don't want to be seen out with the likes of us!'

'Mrs. Galer,' he said, 'that is precisely my heart's desire.'

'I do think,' declared the little woman, 'you're the best and kindest gentleman that ever was.' He gave a gesture of protest. 'I mean it. Girls, this is going to be something that we shall look back on all our lives.'

'No,' said the girls, acutely taking their lead from Milly, 'it's a take in of some kind.'

'We've dreamt things like this.'

'We can't 'elp looking silly, but we *can* 'elp being silly.'

Arguments against this attitude proved worse than useless. The more earnest the captain and Mrs. Galer became, the more certain were the girls that here was something new and delusive in the shape of practical jokes. To hurry home, dress up in Sunday clothes, hurry back, and then find no carriage waiting: this would be just the incident to appeal to a man's sense of humour, and to make of them a laughing stock. So Milly, on behalf of her colleagues, thanked the captain and Mrs. Galer, and intimated that it were necessary to rise very early indeed in the morning in order to get the best of them.

'The carriage,' said the captain, slightly nettled, and preparing to go through the passage, 'the open carriage will be waiting outside the Mount Pleasant gates at the precise hour of nine.'

'He's engaged a parcels post van,' cried the girls amusedly.

'Mrs. Galer, you at least will be there. I'm going upstairs to dress.'

The girls on being reproved for their incredulity felt half inclined to waver, but they decided just before leaving that it would be undignified to change their mind now; they went, blaming each other severely for not having exercised more common-sense, and pointing out resemblances between their heads and suet puddings. Janie Wills, informed of the importance of the occasion, became a deft and an industrious lady's-maid, and Mrs.

Galer, running into the dressmaker's next door to receive criticism or advice, was told by Miss Jeffrey that she looked fit to go anywhere.

''Aven't kept you waiting, I hope?'

'You are worth waiting for, Mrs. Galer.'

'Lovely carriage!'

'I should always have the best,' said the captain, 'if I could afford it. This evening I can afford it. Permit me. Sit on this side, if you don't mind.'

'Facing the 'orses?'

'And now,' he said at the carriage door, 'where would you like to go?'

'*You* decide,' begged Mrs. Galer. 'Once I get out of Clerkenwell, I'm in a foreign country. I've often promised meself that one day I'd start at Wallis's and go all the way up Holborn and Oxford Street, and find out for certain which side of the park Marble Arch was. I've 'eard such lots of arguments on that point.'

'Drive down the Avenue, my man,' he commanded to the purple-faced coachman, 'and through Gray's Inn Road into Holborn. Know the way?'

'You tell me,' said the coachman caustically, 'if I should take the wrong turning. I've only been driving about London all me life, and consequently it's new to me!'

'I've lived all my life in London, too,' said Mrs. Galer brightly.

'Then you can sympathise with me, lady,' said the purple-faced driver, over his shoulder. 'You and me are a pair. Not in looks, I don't mean,' he added flatteringly. 'Didn't we meet at a cemetery once?'

'Thumb better?' she inquired.

Mrs. Galer tried to loll back, but, finding this difficult, sat upright as the carriage went along, enjoying the attention given to her by passengers on omnibuses, who looked over at her from outside seats, peered from the inside; children on the pavement cheered. At the Holborn Town Hall, where Galer had once taken her, an eighteenpenny dance was beginning, and youths, carefully muffled around the neck, preparing to remove their buttonhole of flowers from overcoat to inside jacket, with haughty young women taking off travelling gloves and putting on those which had a scent of benzine—these waited on the steps for a moment in order to see the happy little woman in the passing carriage, and give a guess of her identity. Once clear of Clerkenwell, and on the asphalted roadway, less of interest appeared to be exhibited.

'Never felt so much like Royalty in all my life, captain!'

'No!' shouted the purple-faced driver over his shoulder. 'That's down in Dean Street, Soho. This is the Royal. Took the missis there last week; *she* enjoyed it, but a lot of it struck me as being mere tomfoolery. I like some'ing serious myself.'

'Royalty,' remarked her companion, 'would envy you the happiness of your life.'

'Don't do so badly, do I? I've got lots to be thankful for. There's many worse off. The most fortunate thing is that I'm fond of work. You don't particularly care for it, do you, captain?'

'To tell you the truth, I have never tried. Always managed without it.'

'That's the one drawback of being born a gentleman. Still, so long as you live an honest life——'

'The Oxford!' announced the coachman. 'See that picture of a girl on the poster as we passed? Know what she earns a week? Mind you, this is strictly *infra dig.*; what I mean to say is it mustn't go any further. Well, she earns week in and week out no less than——' He named the sum in a confidential whisper. 'And what she does with it nobody knows. She don't know herself.'

'I should put some of it by, shouldn't you, captain?'

'No,' he said, in his easy way. 'I have never found myself inclined to do that. I have been well off, Mrs. Galer, and I have been hard up, but, whatever the circumstances, I have always got rid of every ten-pound note, of every penny, with all convenient despatch.'

'Ah, well! We are as God made us.'

'Sometimes,' he remarked, 'sometimes I wish we were not. To tell you the truth,' he went on, bursting away from his usual manner, 'I get confoundedly ashamed of myself when I think of it. Never more so, never more so than when I am near to a hard-working little woman like you. I 'm no use to the world at all. The world could get on better without me. If I went out of the world to-night, nobody would care.'

'I think *I* should care.'

He touched her hand lightly. 'Wish I deserved your friendship,' he said.

'Care to go down Regent Street?' asked the driver, 'or would you rather see some more sights? It wouldn't be much out of the way to take you past a place where I sor a man arrested once—arrested by the police.'

The captain gave an order.

'Pity to miss it, lady, now you 're so close, and I could act it all to you jest as it 'appened. My missus is never tired of 'earing of it. The way he fought and struggled and screamed and swore——'

'I think I said Regent Street.'

'Very well,' said the driver resignedly. ''Ave your own tinpot way about it. Only don't turn round afterwards and blame *me!*'

Mrs. Galer whispered to her companion in an awed voice as the commissionaire at the restaurant saluted them, that it looked like an expensive place; the captain replied that it had that advantage. She hesitated in the marble-pillared hall, dazzled by the surroundings, and the magnificent air worn by the smartly dressed men and women (who seemed to have no fear of catching cold) coming out flushed with generous food; glanced at herself in the mirrored walls, and recognised that Miss Jeffrey's best efforts counted here for little.

She begged the captain to send her home alone after dinner, because it occurred to her that supper for the lodgers might not perhaps be safe in the amateur hands of Janie Wills. Ballard was there, and this proved fortunate, for she had to recount

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the astonishing incidents of the memorable evening to some one, and Ballard could always listen.

'And then he lifted his hat and saw me into the carriage, and paid the man, and said he was going on to lose some money over a quiet game of cards. And such a perfect gentleman all the time, Mr. Ballard.'

'Oh!'

'And treating me as though I was a perfect lady.'

'Why shouldn't he?'

'What the evening must have cost him, goodness only knows.'

'Did he pay up what he owed you? And did he say when he was going to clear out and leave?'

'Mr. Ballard! Haven't you got more sense than to ask questions like that?'

'No,' said the railway-man, as he wound up his alarum. 'Can't say I 'ave!'

CHAPTER VIII

MILLY, the head girl, had come to a decision usually counted important, and one with which Mrs. Galer found herself in sympathy. Her latest young man, who had for some time shown considerable ability in evading work, now sighing for fresh fields, announced his intention of proceeding to one of the colonies in order to see whether the same cautious procedure might be carried out there. He could scarcely be expected to live on nothing, he argued: body and soul (on this point he shewed obstinacy), body and soul must be kept together. On Milly discovering that Canada was miles upon miles away, and that men who went there generally settled down for life and married some lady of the country ('Black as your stror hat, I expect,' she remarked), the girl became touched by the romance of the affair, and pointed out one night, after listening to an acutely sentimental song chanted by a shrill-voiced boy at Sadlers Wells, that in the laundry business marriage did not necessitate giving up the earning of wages, and suggested that Mr. Bob Coates should marry her. They could live on with her mother, and if, as she had heard it argued, it proved as cheap to keep two as to keep one, then

surely to keep three instead of two would be an act of pure economy. Mr. Coates at first declined to give an answer, on the grounds that he was being run after by two or three other girls, but this being a statement wanting in the precious quality of truth, Milly retorted that he could take the chance or leave it. Mr. Coates, a type of the Londoner who has few personal ambitions, haggled for a while, and at last grudgingly consented.

All the girls took their troubles to the proprietress of the laundry, and it was to Mrs. Galer that Milly confided the new information, with the added detail that she proposed to let nobody else know until the ceremony was over. Mrs. Galer would not hear of this. A wedding ought to be a wedding, and it was not right to reduce the importance. You were only married once in your life.

'Or perhaps twice,' said Milly.

The little woman laughed and blushed, and said that Milly could consult the captain if she liked and ascertain from him whether or not in the best circles it was usual to hush up the marriage ceremony. As for Milly's mother, it would not take long to settle her. Milly had been a very good girl for work, and if it meant a question of the advance of a pound or so——

'That settles it then!' said Milly.

Monday appeared to be a good day, one that would interfere as little as possible with the progress of business; the bride foresaw that the selection entailed a certain risk, but Mrs. Galer, admitting this, promised not to breathe so much as a single

word to the other girls. (On Fridays and Saturdays there was now scarcely room for all the hands.)

The day had begun with a thick fog, pressing down almost to the pavement, so that the single knocks of the callers-up in Kimmer Street failed at first to arouse sleepers, who, taking an optimistic view, assumed that the noise was part and parcel of their dreams, and that the hour must be (say) four, and not six, with the result that they stumbled out of doors with hurry in their manner, cannoned in the yellow darkness against each other, blamed everybody else for clumsiness, and growled and coughed their way to work. Later, the fog rolled off slowly, but left a mist to hold the place until it made up its mind to return. Lights had to remain in the shop windows, and Ballard, called out to act as relief in the duty of fog-signalling on the Great Northern, said to Mrs. Galer that goodness and the chief inspector only knew when he would be home.

'Another five and six,' whispered Miss Jeffrey in the church, where the mist had entered immediately that the doors opened, 'say another six and six, and I could have made her a dress that would have lasted a lifetime. Couple of years, at any rate. Still, some people will be cheeseparing, even at a moment like this. I'm sure in me own case I shouldn't mind what I gave, so long as I looked something out of the common.'

'Did I tell you about my Sid?'

'I decided long ago,' said the dressmaker, still in an awed undertone, 'what I should be married in, but fashions change so often, that I've had to alter

me mind thousands of times. Not reelly thousands, of course; it isn't so long ago as all that.'

'Mr. Bryant called round to see me yesterday afternoon. Sid 's gained his County Council scholarship, and he 's going to a fresh school. I 'm going to buy him a fifteen-pound bicycle.'

'Don't talk so much in church,' warned Miss Jeffrey piously. 'Say what you like, it 's consecrated ground. I sometimes think I ought to go more often than I do. Dare say I should go three times a day if I had anybody to go with. Poor Mr. Grimsteed that I was half engaged to once, he set his face against church *and* chapel. It was a question of principle with him, you understand. "Dearest," he used to say (always called me dearest for some reason), "Dearest, you 'll never find me going to any place where they have a collection." Not that he was mean, mind you; he was only rather close. Ah!' sighed Miss Jeffrey, looking up at the steps near the altar, 'we should have made a happy couple, him and me, if he 'd only been spared. Talk about turtle-doves!'

Miss Jeffrey borrowed Mrs. Galer's handkerchief. A few people came into the church shyly, taking the first and nearest pews, and edging up gradually to a better position; Mrs. Galer felt glad to see that among them was no one from neighbouring establishments; you never knew what laundry girls would be likely to do on such an occasion. A roughish lot some of them; hers were the only quiet girls in the neighbourhood.

'She 's asked me to look in at her mother's place

afterwards,' whispered Miss Jeffrey. 'If you're going too, I don't know that I shan't. It'll liven them up a bit,' she added, wiping away her tears; ''specially if they can get me to recite. Will there be any single gentlemen there?'

'The captain 'alf promised,' said Mrs. Galer, 'but he was afraid he was in for a busy day.'

'Never quite understood what he did for a living. Besides the racing tips, I mean.'

'Old Mr. Leadbetter's coming if the fog clears off properly. The fog always catches the poor old gentleman; makes him so cross that he denounces everybody and everything. Except me!' laughed Mrs. Galer.

'*Do* try to remember where you are,' implored the dressmaker.

A sound of argument outside the church door. Two brides and two bridegrooms entered, the brides nudging the gentlemen to remind them of the necessity for removing hats. The contention went on. Mrs. Galer, perturbed by the tardiness of her head girl, went quietly down the aisle.

'Jolly good thing for me,' cried Bob Coates violently, 'that I come across the slip of paper jest in time. You twisted it up to give me a light for my pipe when I was leaving your mother's, and I didn't use only the end of it.'

'What's all this?' demanded Mrs. Galer. Milly and her mother shook their heads. Milly's mother said, with undisguised frankness of speech, that she had foreseen it, and would have mentioned the fact if she had been asked. 'What are you kicking up

this row about? Why don't you come along in and get married like a sensible human being?'

'It's precisely because I am sensible,' he retorted, '*and* humin *and* a being, that I'm going to dash well do nothing of the sort. Apparently,' roared Mr. Coates bitterly, 'apparently people are lab'ring under the delusion that I'm a juggins. Let 'em prove it, that's all.'

'I'm not deaf,' said Mrs. Galer.

'And I'm not dumb.'

'When you've quite finished bragging, perhaps you'll tell me what all the trouble's about?'

'Do be sensible, Bob,' urged the girl piteously, 'and tell Mrs. Galer all about it. Don't make your future wife look like a fool.'

'How can I 'elp what you look like? Taken a lot of trouble over me own appearance, and all for nothing, it seems. Placing meself under an obligation to a lot of my friends and rigging meself out in the best I could obtain! I tell you, if I wasn't a amiable chap'—here he threw his borrowed hat on the ground violently—'I should feel inclined to lose me temper.'

'Come 'ere,' said Mrs. Galer. Mr. Coates replied sulkily that he wanted no truck with her. 'Come 'ere at once, when I tell you.' He came. 'Now, then, put it as short as you can, and let me know what's the matter.'

'I'm not going to be imposed on.'

'Should think not, indeed. Who's been daring to try it on?'

'It's like this, Mrs. Galer,' he explained, more

calmly. 'You're a business woman, and you'll understand. I come across by accident, I did, a slip of paper or a document or what not, showing that Milly had been working out her domestic expenses, totalling it all up, and making it come to exactly what she's earning per week.'

'Very sensible idea, too.'

'So far as that goes,' said Mr. Coates, placing his hat on carefully, 'I'm with you. But how much do I find she's allotted to me out of her earnings? Fact of the matter is,' falling back on his previous statement, 'people seem to have an idea that Bob Coates is a juggins.'

'If you don't look sharp and come inside and get married, they'll be sure of it.'

'I ask you, Mrs. Galer, ma'am,' he argued, with humility, 'is two bob a week a fair allowance to make a grown-up 'usband? I'm quite prepared to stand by your decision. You're a level-'eaded woman, lady I mean to say, and what you say is fair and square *is* fair and square, and I'm prepared to abide by it. There you are!' added Mr. Coates, gazing at the porch steadily; 'I can't be more straightforward than that, not even if I tried.'

Mrs. Galer looked at her head girl's appealing face; looked at the young man; looked at the red sun trying to get the best of the fog.

'What you'll get whilst you're out of work,' she said judicially, 'is three pence a day and six pence on Saturdays, and be jolly thankful for it. Now, come in, both of you, or else we shall be late.'

The little woman convoyed them to the open

door, and standing back there, followed them up the aisle, Mr. Coates moving his lips silently in an endeavour to ascertain by mental arithmetic to what extent he had bettered his condition. A nervous young curate, with a high voice, hurried through the ceremony, restrained by Mrs. Galer and others possessing knowledge and experience from mixing the couples. From outside the porch came a sound of voices; Milly looked around with apprehension. Miss Jeffrey came forward to meet her, crying, and adjusting the bridal costume at the shoulder, remarked in a low voice that a wedding always upset her more than a funeral any day of the week.

'Ooray! 'Ip, 'ip, 'ooray!'

The new Mrs. Coates took in the situation at a glance. Gave her marriage certificate to the safe custody of Mrs. Galer; put her head well down; bunched up her skirts with one hand, and with the other shielding her face, ran. Rice, confetti, bits of turf, gravel came flying after her, and she did not altogether escape them, but some of the laundry girls stayed their hands in a desire to pelt the bridegroom. He came out a minute later, saying defiantly, 'Yes; throw anything at me, that's all!' which they instantly did. Mrs. Galer and Miss Jeffrey and the two other couples and their friends went whilst the crowd devoted all its attention to Mr. Coates, deriding that gentleman's protests, and ignoring his plea that they should refrain from damaging Bill Parker's overcoat.

'Girls,' said Mrs. Galer excusingly, when the

dishevelled bridegroom, having escaped owing to a failure of ammunition on the part of the enemy, had caught them up, 'girls will have their fling.'

'But not at me,' protested Mr. Coates, dusting himself. 'I like a joke as well as anybody, but——'

'You don't like it against yourself. You'll have to be a bit less selfish now that you're a married man.'

'Less selfish than what I am already?'

'You've got responsibilities now.'

'No, I ain't,' protested Mr. Coates. 'It's her that's got responsibilities. You women take such a prejudiced view.'

Miss Jeffrey had work to do, including the repair of an alleged ermine-bordered jacket, but she said it could wait; she felt too much upset to sit down at her sewing-machine. Mrs. Galer put on an apron, and with the help of Janie Wills (good, useful girl, Janie; Mrs. Galer told her on this day for the first time that she wished she had such a daughter, and Janie, holding her penholder in the air for a moment, flushed at the compliment), with the help of Janie Wills opened parcels, which had been collected by Johnnie Leadbetter on a hand-cart, and sorted the contents in the various bins. The little woman was, in consequence, the last to arrive at the wedding-party, and Milly's mother, who had devoted herself to the important work of providing food, remarked, on opening the door, that, given two minutes more, they would have seated themselves at table without her.

'I don't expect people to come 'ere,' said Milly's

mother with candour, 'unless they're asked, and even if they're asked, I don't care much whether they come or not. I can always do with me own company—prefer it, in fact. Shut the door after you and keep the fog out. How much were you foolish enough to give for your hat?'

Mainly owing to the uncompromising frankness of the bride's parent, the wedding-party exhibited reserve; the mournful attitude of Miss Jeffrey assisted. In a corner the bridegroom smoked silently; it appeared that Milly's mother had occupied the time by telling him of his faults. This was just the situation for little Mrs. Galer. She started the bride's mother on the work of taking the slices of ham out of paper, herself laid the cloth, placing dishes on the spots where a darn showed conspicuously, sent Mr. Coates out with a large jug, carved the cold roast fowl on a side table to prevent delay when the guests should take their seats. On the bridegroom returning with the large jug filled and a white cloud atop, it was found that the family possessed but one tumbler, which had hitherto met all the requirements; Milly's mother, under direction, went to her neighbours on the floor above and in the houses on either side and borrowed glasses, repaying for the loan with an invitation to the owners to come in for a few minutes after the breakfast. 'Mind you,' she said to them, 'I should never 'ave invited you only that I don't want to be under an obligation to anybody.'

'Now then,' cried Mrs. Galer. ''Ealth of the bride and bridegroom!'

Mr. Coates being requested by his wife not to sit like a tailor's dummy, but to stand up and say a few words, argued that he had never claimed to possess the gift of the gab, but Milly said that he could talk thirteen to the dozen when there was no necessity, and ordered him to do as he was told. Nice way of beginning married life upon *her* word, to refuse the first thing he was asked to do; had he not heard what the clergyman said not a couple of hours ago? Mr. Coates answered gloomily in the affirmative, adding that he wished to goodness he had not heard; he reckoned this was the worst day's work he had ever done in all his life; the ladies all hurried to give the obvious retort that it was a novelty for him to be doing any work at all.

'Go on, Bob Coates,' urged Mrs. Galer pleasantly. 'You may be a born orator for all you know.'

'Mind you,' said the bridegroom warningly, as he rose, 'I'm bound to make a mull of it. If old Leadbetter was 'ere now—why, what a coincidence! Milly, go and open the door to him.'

'Go and open it yourself!' replied his wife.

The new visitor brought in some of the fog with him, but this did not matter, for here was one able to deliver the spoken word with grace and pure enjoyment. Milly, honoured by his presence, warmed some ale in a saucepan—('It'll take me years,' grumbled her mother, 'to get everything straight again')—and in ten minutes the old gentleman was at the head of the table, displacing the bridegroom, who sat back, watching him with respect, elbows

resting on knees. Old Leadbetter said, with a flourish of handkerchief, that he had been given to understand that a few words were required from him; a few words only he would offer. He ventured to hope that he was precise and correct in describing this as a happy occasion; if they were discouraged by the weather, let them remember that behind the mist the sun was always shining.

'Hear, hear!' cried Mrs. Galer emphatically.

It reminded him of days in the sixties, which were not within the recollection of any lady present. Out on the Green, under the very shadow of the Sessions House, he, with Odger, with Beale, with others, had spoken every Sunday morning, braving the ridicule of the newspapers, enduring the opposition of Capital. In those days, however, there were men to talk to, men with eyes to see and ears to hear; nowadays, even at the Forum in Farringdon Street, it was as much as one could expect to find a dozen men in the room, and half of these were generally asleep. Once it had been possible to arouse enthusiasm by pointing out the infernal——

'Not too much of it, please,' interrupted Milly's mother. 'Not in my 'ouse, at any rate.'

By pointing out the considerable defects in our monarchical system. Watch the falling-off in the intelligence of the masses. Only last Sunday afternoon he had seized the opportunity to make some few remarks concerning the Queen.

'You didn't dare!' cried Mrs. Galer strenuously, 'you surely didn't dare to say a word against the dear old lady. Wish I 'd been there, that 's all.'

'Wonder they didn't spoil his features for him,' said the lady neighbours who had entered during the delivery of the speech. 'Only that some features can't be spoilt.'

'I think you ought to know where to stop, Mr. Leadbetter,' remarked Milly.

'Gift of the gab,' said the bridegroom, 'sometimes carries a man away.'

'Why don't you take the 'int?' inquired Milly's mother.

'Tell you what!' cried Mrs. Galer soothingly, 'we'll give over speech-making and have games. I've thought of a man alive.'

'You widows!' said Bob Coates.

'The Army,' went on Mrs. Galer, looking at the ceiling, and giving the two first clues, 'and the laundry business.' The others thought for a while, and then shook their heads, demanding more light. 'Clerkenwell and a frock-coat.'

Still unable to guess. 'Oh, you are dull!' cried the little woman delightedly. ''Ampstead 'Eath on a Bank Holiday and patent leather——'

'The captain!' cried Milly.

'Right!' she said.

'What you getting so red in the face for, ma'am?' asked Milly's mother curiously.

'*I've* thought of one,' said Bob Coates.

'You shut up,' urged his wife. 'You 'aven't got sense enough for this game.'

'A man alive,' he persisted. 'Good appearance and a ceremony in church.'

'You can't be thinking of yourself!'

'But I was, though.'

'Ijiot!' said the bride contemptuously.

Milly's mother confessed, on telling the guests plainly it was high time they cleared out, that Mrs. Galer had helped with the party. She added that she did not know where Mrs. Galer obtained her good spirits; from all one heard there existed small excuse for her cheerful demeanour apart from the fact that she had a very fair business of her own. Milly's mother returned the borrowed tumblers, and at the front door (where the fog had apparently been waiting patiently) intimated very clearly to the neighbours that if they ever had a wedding or a funeral in the family and omitted to invite her, the probability was that she would find herself compelled to say what she thought of them. With a final warning to the whole party not to go saying things about her behind her back, the genial hostess closed the door on them, and they went out into the fog.

It had now become such a yellow and such a solid fog that the neighbours relinquished their intention of standing about to discuss the wedding-breakfast, and ran at once to their respective houses. The fog brought all the streets into similitude, and cloaked turnings and obliterated names and shuttered shop windows, and gave mystery even to kerb stones, so that you were continually finding an unexpected step down, or an equally unexpected step up. In the roadway drivers walked at horses' heads, with the lamps of carts in their hands; muffled voices asked whether they were

right for The Angel, as though making amateur efforts in ventriloquism. Sometimes you could see the faint blurred light of a street gas-lamp, but this was not until you had blundered up against the post which held it. The fog deadened sounds and aggravated shapes; figures which looked enormous came now and again, and stopping, said vaguely and generally and foolishly, 'Why the deuce don't you look where you're going?'

Mrs. Galer, born in Clerkenwell, and bred in Clerkenwell, and knowing it as she knew her own staircase, was surprised to find herself and her elderly lodger—both with handkerchiefs pressed over mouths, and refraining from speech—in Clerkenwell Road; she could have declared that they had turned out of St. John Street Road. Here was a lighter shade, and pursuing it the two found a public-house newly changed from reticence and empty casks for seats into a mirrored, plate-glassed, beplushed mansion. Old Leadbetter, gasping, managed to convey an invitation, but the little woman said promptly that she would rather get home; she had been gallivanting quite enough of late; high time she began to look seriously after her business.

'But you go in, Mr. Leadbetter. Don't mind me, I can get 'ome all right.'

'Sure you're able to take care of yourself.'

'That's just what I am clever at,' she replied.

She took no more risks, but made her way westward past the large Sessions House which, under the present conditions, looked no more impressive

than the Salvation Army stores; the windows were lighted, and this meant that the court was sitting within, and that justice, ignoring the confusion into which the outer world was thrown, proceeded steadily, majestically. Little Mrs. Galer shivered, and said, 'Poor souls!' She went over the bridge of the underground railway, where the horses of tram-cars were making efforts to get a foothold on the greasy, slippery roadway, and receiving criticisms on their failure from conductor and driver; then, turning sharply to the right, she kept near to the wall. A faint long roar of voices came down Farringdon Road, and she stood back presently in the doorway of a factory near Bowling Green Lane to see what happened. This was the best of London, that, fog or no fog, week-day or Sunday, summer or winter, you did not live long without encountering incident. Windows above opened; voices of interested women came from other doorways.

'Stop *him!* Ketch *him!* 'Old *him!* Collar *him!*'

The shouting, screaming crowd came nearer. She feared lest they should turn down by the parcel post office, which occupied the place of the old prison; in that case she would miss the sight of some one flying madly to escape capture. No; they were not going down the Avenue.

'Don't miss him! Don't let him give us the slip. Stop *him!*'

'Captain!' cried Mrs. Galer.

He stopped his excited shouting, and turned. Those near in the rushing crowd looked around to

see why they had lost one of their most enthusiastic leaders, but paused for a moment only; the cataract went by.

'What mischief have you been up to now?' asked Mrs. Galer chaffingly.

'Let's get away,' he panted, 'let's get away home, or anywhere. They may come back.'

'They'll never succeed in all this fog.'

'I'm fortunate,' he panted, 'dam fortunate! Where's my hat?'

'You've been and lost it,' she said reprovingly. 'Wonder you 'aven't lost your 'ead.'

'No,' he gasped, 'no. If I had, they would have nabbed me.'

'Hasn't been a nice day for Milly's wedding, has it?' she remarked, giving up the attempt to understand him. 'They were sorry you didn't come.'

'Stop that cackle of yours,' he ordered roughly. 'I've no time to listen to you and your——'

'Never 'eard you swear before,' she said. She pointed to the leathern handle which he still held, and tried again to restore him to calm; he talked with a startling absence of his usual politeness and refinement. 'Sold the rest of it?' she asked.

He looked down. He threw the handle violently into the fog.

'Some one made a tug at it. Which is the way home? Take me there like lightning!'

'Captain, captain!' she cried. 'You're not yourself this evening.'

'Wish to Heaven I were not.'

They went through the back way, the captain crouching in a round-shouldered way, his overcoat collar up. Here was the beginning of Kimmer Street, and here, after careful piloting, the corner of the laundry; he made a sudden dart through the lighted opening.

'Lock the front door!' he cried, 'put the chain up.' She obeyed. 'Now,' he went on, 'now you've got to help me. You see the position I'm in! Hide me. Hide me!'

'You've had a drop to drink,' she said. 'Mr. Ballard will be 'ome soon, and I'll get him to talk to you.'

'Ballard mustn't see me,' he cried furiously. 'I ran up the platform and on to the line when they started to chase me, and went right into Ballard's arms. Right into Ballard's arms. And he knows the game I've been playing. What about that cellar?'

The little woman pressed her hand against her forehead. 'Come on,' she said quietly. 'Don't let the girl 'ear you.'

A loud definite knock at the front door. The voices of some men in the shop.

'Narrow shave!' said the captain. And disappeared.

Mrs. Galer, white of face, but composed of manner, went in. The sergeant ceased his knocking at the front door, and came into the laundry, edging his men aside. Outside, the women of Kimmer Street hastened up, anxious to miss nothing.

''Aven't seen him since he went out this morning,'

replied Mrs. Galer. ''Ope to goodness he hasn't disappeared. To tell you the truth, he's a bit behind'and with his rent. Sometimes,' here she endeavoured to smile, 'sometimes that accounts for a lot!'

CHAPTER IX

MANY events had tended to modify the exuberance of Johnnie Leadbetter; the first of these had been the defection, some time since, of his chum from the Clerkenwell Terrors, thus reducing the strength of that adventurous band by one-half. Sid, hastening to his new school or returning thoughtfully home, or coming out of the free library at the corner of Whiskin Street, acknowledged the other lad's shouted salutations in a casual way that had about it a touch of the absent mind, and more than a touch of condescension. Johnnie complained about this to Janie Wills, asking that young woman's views on the application of remedy in the form of a punching of the head; Janie replied that if he dared so much as breathe a word to her in dispraise of Sid she would never look at him more. Janie Wills added, pointedly, that it seemed a pity others did not copy Sid's bright example, instead of joining a gymnasium, doing monkey tricks on the horizontal bar and so forth. Johnnie Leadbetter, greatly hurt by this, invited her to test for herself the signal improvement which these exercises had made in his muscle above the elbow, but Miss Wills said he was interrupting her in domestic work,

and suggested that he should make himself scarce with all convenient despatch. He replied haughtily that he could take a hint as well as anybody, and went to purchase some borax for Mrs. Galer, to write his initials on hoardings, and to regret the fact that miracles had ceased to happen. Certainly, a chance offered of getting a very good start in the Parcels Delivery out in Goswell Road so soon as school released him; two of his numerous relatives were engaged there, but this was not immediate or striking. If he could but find opportunity for saving somebody's life, for a daring rescue with the aid of a fire-escape, for the arrest of a runaway horse! Meanwhile here was incident in Kimmer Street.

'Rum sort of a go this, Mr. Ballard!' he remarked. One or two plain-clothes men stamped about the neighbourhood, flattering themselves that because they smoked briar pipes they were being taken for the ordinary loafer of Clerkenwell. Ballard, relieved at the disappearance of the captain, applied himself—his corduroy trousers gartered at the knees, and, for the occasion, in unblackened boots—with his old energy to the hopeless task of giving to the back garden something of the appearance of the county of Kent ere the builder came in to take possession. 'I've struck a lot of queer things in my time, but this one's the champion. Funny he should 'ave run plump against you!'

'Don't see anything particular amusing about it,' said the railway-man. 'Mind where you're stepping.'

'When I say funny, I mean mysterious.'

'Get into the 'abit of saying what you mean, my lad.'

'Think he 's left the neighbourhood, Mr. Ballard? Think he's slipped away off to Australia or somewheres?'

'Look 'ere!' said Ballard, resting. 'I've been badgered a good deal on this subject the last day or two; I've had to write memorandums on the topic; I've had our police-inspector at me about it; I've had to go to King's Cross Road, and be talked to as though I 'd made away with my sister; and, to tell you the truth, I 'm about full up. If you're going to 'elp, my lad, why 'elp; but if you're going to cackle, why cackle elsewhere. So long as he *has* slipped off it isn't for us to interfere!'

'I of'en think,' said the boy, sweeping up some leaves with a bald broom, 'that one 'alf of the world doesn't know how the other 'alf lives.'

'Doesn't care, neither.'

'Ever done anything to get your name in the papers, Mr. Ballard?'

Ballard shook his head. 'Nor yet wanted,' he said.

'Gran'father was in *Reynolds's* more than once when he was young. Father was in the *Clerkenwell News* the week he married. He always said that he should never 'ave picked a quarrel if the best man hadn't started chaffing him. Do you think the captain's anything of a boxer?'

'I warned you!' cautioned Ballard. The two

"IF YOU'RE GOING TO 'ELP, MY LAD, WHY 'ELP; BUT IF YOU'RE GOING TO CACKLE, WHY CACKLE ELSEWHERE"

worked. 'How you getting on at your school now?'

'Education,' said the boy sagely, 'is like everything else; all very well up to a certain point. What's going to be the good of me knowing when I'm a man the names of 'Enry the Eighth's wives?'

'You never know when the question may crop up,' remarked Ballard. 'If I could put a letter together in what you may call ship-shape form I should be able to say good-bye to corduroys to-morrow.' He looked up at the window. 'And then——'

'What you ought to do,' said the boy, growing dogmatic in the presence of this self-depreciation, 'is to join one of these evening classes that have been started over at a place I can point out to you, and set to and learn. I'm going to do it if I find meself at all backward in anything after I leave school. You simply go there and you take the list like you would at a rest'rong, and you don't say, as you 'ave to at a Board School, "I'll 'ave everything," but you just pick out the one or two things you reelly fancy. S'posing you was on a job where you had to track people; then you'd say, "Well, I must get 'old of a bit of jography." You see? Then you'd know where the places was, without asking, and if you was told off to find out where the captain——'

'I don't want to give you a clip on the ear,' said Ballard kindly, 'but you must admit you're asking for it. One of the few things they don't learn you

at the Board School is apparently to—— Hullo! Where have I 'eard that voice before? Put all them tools away, kiddie, in the usual place.'

Amongst Johnnie Leadbetter's newly acquired habits was one of doing, occasionally, as he was told. He took the spade and fork with hurry, because he, too, desired to ascertain what was going on in the shop, and why voices were being raised. It seemed dark down in the cellar, two mere stars of light glimmered in round wire cages; he kicked against the new wringers. On the right the unpainted door, with its fresh plastering at the top and sides, that led to the cellar of the next house, was newly hidden by a high pile of wood. Mrs. Galer had bustled the men engaged on the work until one had declared that he scarce knew whether he felt justified in calling his soul his own, but during the last two days she had allowed them, to their great surprise, to go off to another job of which they had spoken, admitting that the completion of the work at her place was not, after all, of such great urgency as she had led them to suppose. Johnnie Leadbetter, despite anxiety to return upstairs and listen, found himself tempted by the newness of the communicating door to remove some of the wood, to take lead-pencil from pocket, and make an indelible record there, for the benefit and information of posterity. An opportunity so excellent might not happen again. He had just finished the curl of the first letter, when he heard the lock of the new door being turned. The door pressed gently against him, and

against the bundles of wood. He waited for it to open still further. A scent of cigar smoke came. The boy was about to speak (without quite knowing what he should say), when the harsh female voice above came nearer to the steps of the cellar; Mrs. Galer was inviting the owner of it to walk through the passage into the house, where matters could be discussed without an audience.

The new door closed; the key turned on the inside. Johnnie Leadbetter replaced the wood quietly.

'If you don't want a new customer,' the woman shouted truculently, 'you 've only got to say so.'

'I have said so,' replied Mrs. Galer.

'And isn't my money good enough, then? I bring a parcel of body-linen here, and because I happen to get into argument with one of your girls, you come in and order me out of the place.'

'I won't have rows,' said the little woman calmly. 'Besides, you were using language.'

'I haven't used it all,' remarked the other. She coughed, and upbraided herself for coughing. 'I 've led the kind of life where you have to listen to a lot of it. I was a mere slip of a girl when I was in the chorus at the old Philharmonic. Mind you, at that time I 'd got a voice.'

'You 've got one now,' said Mrs. Galer, 'and I don't like the sound of it. You take it away, my good woman.'

'You dare call me a good woman!'

'Take it away, and take your parcel, and don't let 's have any more of this disturbance. Or else'—

here she looked around at Ballard standing sentry at the front door—'or else I shall 'ave to send for the police.'

'Oh!' said the woman ironically. She held her newspaper parcel as though it were a banjo; the left shoulder of her thick jacket had been abraded by a strap. Ballard watched these details with the eyes of a man whose thoughts move slowly. Johnnie Leadbetter listened with both ears; his mouth wide open, for the moment he forgot to rub his head. 'Send for the police, ay? Haven't you seen enough of them lately?'

'I don't mind seeing them again. They're useful sometimes.'

'Shall I go and call one now?' Ballard made room for her to pass by.

'If you don't mind!'

'Look here,' said the large woman, returning, after this feint, 'I'm never one to pick a quarrel. It's my misfortune I should be mixed up pretty often in rows; I'll take my oath it isn't my fault. I call round here in a peaceable frame of mind to get some information, and I'd rather be amicable than otherwise.'

'It wasn't a question of business, then?' said Mrs. Galer.

'I'm rough in me manner,' she went on. 'If you'd had to sing in the open air after being accustomed to a life of luxury, comparatively speaking, you'd find yourself change as the years went on. Why, for one whole year I didn't do a stroke of work.'

'That's no credit to you.'

'And if it hadn't been for my temper, I need never have had to tramp about as I do. I've been a fool to myself, and,' truculent again, 'if you don't believe it, ask people who knew Julia Carterson as she was then and Julia Carterson as she is now.'

Mrs. Galer went to the front door where Ballard, with leisurely arriving illumination on his features, remained on guard. 'This is the way out,' said Mrs. Galer politely.

'Not till I've had one word with you!'

'Mr. Ballard, just step outside for a moment. Johnnie Leadbetter, go into the shop. Janie Wills, see to the fireplace. Now then, ma'am.'

The woman bent down and whispered.

'Gone,' said Mrs. Galer, trembling for a moment. 'Clean gone. That's all I can tell you. Good-evening.'

The woman stopped on the pavement as the front door closed on her. She looked in fiercely at the muslin-curtained window of the shop; Mrs. Galer had returned already, urging the girls to make up for lost time, and herself setting an example.

'Quarrelled with everybody, as usual,' muttered the large woman aloud. 'Just my luck.' She went on.

'Think I've had the honour of running up against you before,' said Ballard. 'Looking for the captain, if it isn't a rude question?'

'It is a rude question,' she remarked defiantly, 'but what if I am? Is it anything to do with you?'

'Not to any great extent,' he said. 'Only there's just this about it, you mustn't come round 'ere kicking up rows, you know. I live 'ere meself.'

'I've been kicking up rows all me life, and I'm not going to stop just to please an awkward slab of a man like you.'

'The captain's got clear,' said Ballard, unmoved, 'and the best service you can do him is to try not to discover where he is. You may be jolly well sure that where you go for a time the tecs will follow.'

'Think I don't know that?'

'I've no great liking for him, but for a special reason I don't want to do the chap a bad turn. If he can manage to make himself scarce, let him make himself scarce.'

'But he may be in want of money?'

'Most of us are,' said Ballard.

'And he may want to see me.'

'That isn't likely.'

'At any rate,' said the big woman, with a gasp, 'I want to see him. I dare say you mean well, but I'm going to find out where he is, police or no police. He hasn't treated me fairly; but that doesn't make any difference to some of us. Never met my sort before, perhaps?'

'I don't go into society,' he said, 'much.'

'There's my address for the present,' she said. 'If you hear anything of him, let me know, and I shan't forget you.'

'Right you are,' said Ballard, accepting the envelope. 'Only, mind, no more calling at this

place, and no more making a hullabaloo round 'ere.'

'I don't promise,' she said brusquely.

They did not speak of the incident at supper that evening. Sid was full of the new school and of the promised bicycle, his mother and Janie Wills listening. Ballard and old Leadbetter, appealed to for an opinion, said that fifteen pounds seemed a lot of money, but that Mrs. Galer was the best judge. On the one hand, fifteen pounds would buy a lot of things—new washers, give a start, say, to the dyeing and cleaning agency which Mrs. Galer proposed to start shortly.

'If I had but had that sum, once told,' remarked old Leadbetter, 'in '74 I could have organised a revolution. On a small scale, of course.'

'You could get a hot-'ouse,' said Ballard, 'everything complete, for that amount, and grow your own grapes and tomatoes and goodness knows what all.'

'If I had fifteen pounds to spare,' said Janie Wills, 'I should buy a set of furs and some chocolates.'

Mrs. Galer put an end to the boy's anxiety by confessing that she had the sum all ready in smart new notes in the cash-box. (Ballard looked across at the lad, and Sid, arresting his expression of content, frowned slightly at the inconveniently long memory possessed by some people.) In the cash-box upstairs. She had been strongly urged only that day to do something else with the money and it had been pretty hard to make up her mind; if

she had but had two fifteens of ready cash she would not have hesitated a moment. But most of her money was out just now, and—here she sighed, and the others glanced at her, not understanding the mystery—and one's own boy was nearer than anybody else. Her balance in the Savings-bank stood now at a low figure; that could not be helped; in this world, the one thing on which you might count as being absolutely sure and certain, was that you could not eat your cake and have it.

'All I can say is, then,' remarked Ballard, in his deliberate way, and looking at the lad, 'that if he ever for a moment forgets all he owes to his mother, if he ever gives her cause for one single moment's sorrer, if he ever allows her to go out of his mem'ry, why, then, in my opinion, roasting alive would be an act of mistaken kindness. Isn't that so, Mr. Leadbetter?'

'I had a good mother,' quavered the old gentleman, 'but rather than plank down a sum of money like this, she'd have broken every bone in me body. You're a lucky lad, my boy, and you ought to be already thinking how you can repay her, at some future date, for all the sacrifices she's made for you.'

'I expect he is,' suggested Janie Wills shyly.

'Of course, I shall stick by her. You needn't talk as though—— Don't, mother,' protested the boy. 'I've got to make this collar last three days.'

'Was that the front door?' exclaimed Mrs. Galer suddenly. She went to the window and moved one

of the laths of the Venetian blinds. 'Young scamps!' she said.

The circumstance of the lad seating himself at the table and taking up the penholder into which Janie Wills had fixed a fresh nib, formed a hint to the two lodgers. Ballard said that he was going out to have a glance at the evening paper, in order to see whether anybody had left him a fortune; old Leadbetter proposed to do some fly-posting in the interests of a new club about to open doors in City Road; the handbills which he took with him to be affixed, without permission, on hoardings belonging to other people were headed, 'To Right the Wrong!' Mrs. Galer and Janie made up the chair-bedstead in the corner, singing quietly the while.

'Very awkward,' complained the lad, 'having to study down here.'

'Are we in the way?'

'Why can't I have the first-floor back now that the captain's gone?'

'My boy, he might come home at any moment.'

'He'd be out of his mind if he did.'

'Doesn't do to be too hasty,' said his mother anxiously. 'If he was here, no doubt he'd be able to explain.'

'No doubt,' remarked the lad. 'But would he get anybody to believe it? That's the point! He was a rank bad lot, you take my word for it, mother. We shan't see him again in this world, and it's to be hoped we shan't meet him in the next.'

'Mustn't be too 'arsh on people, my boy.'

'He always behaved like a gentleman,' said Janie Wills.

'You women!' he exclaimed disparagingly. 'Anybody can take you in.'

'Let's go upstairs,' suggested his mother peaceably, 'and have a look at the room, and see whether we could make it comfortable for you. I hadn't given it a thought, to tell you the truth. Janie, light a candle.'

Sid explained his suggestions. A desk could be placed just by the window; the bed shifted back into the corner; easy-chair from downstairs could stand by the fireplace; Ballard, a handy man, would fix up a couple of shelves against the wall for books. Mrs. Galer, always keenly interested in any new project, was agreeing to the suggestions, with here and there a slight modification, when a sound was heard again at the front door below. Janie Wills put down the candlestick and ran.

'Another runaway knock, I suppose?' asked Mrs. Galer on the staircase. 'I shall have to talk to some of those youngsters.'

'That woman!' whispered Janie, looking up, excitedly. 'The woman that made such a disturbance. She was just crossing the road. I s'pose she meant to call here again, and then thought better of it.'

'Don't blame her,' said Mrs. Galer. 'The less we two see of each other, the better.'

'She's very coarse in her behaviour,' remarked Janie, still speaking in a sibilant undertone. 'I

should say she wasn't any better than she ought to be.'

'P'r'aps she's got her trials like the rest of us. One never knows. My girl, my girl! Don't put the chain up; Mr. Ballard and Mr. Leadbetter are not in yet.'

'I'm all of a tremble,' said Janie. 'Scarcely know what I'm up to.'

'There's the last post,' remarked Mrs. Galer, going down the stairs. 'Open the door and see who the letter's for.'

Two of the plain-clothes men came into the passage. One put a foot against the door and kept it there: a uniformed man stood outside.

'Can't keep away from us, then?' She held Janie's hand tightly.

'If we always met good-tempered ladies like you,' said the sergeant, stepping over the foot of the man at the door and touching his hat, 'some of us would never take our pensions.'

'Wife keeping well, Mr. Swanson?'

'Moderately,' replied the sergeant, glancing over his shoulder for some one who had not arrived, 'and not more than moderately. I shall have to send her away for a couple of days to Southend; it'll come cheaper in the long-run. I'm a great believer in sea air, mind you, for anybody that's got run down. You're looking well, ma'am!'

'I'm always well,' she said, shivering, and quickly recovering herself, 'and if I ain't I try not to brag about it. Won't you gentlemen come in and shut the door? Draughty for you, standing there.'

'If you feel it at all cold, ma'am,' said the sergeant, 'you go into your comfortable kitchen. We don't want to put you to more ill convenience than we can help. Only this time, if you'll excuse me for mentioning the circumstance, we've got to search the house thoroughly. Thoroughly, mind!'

'You don't mean to say that you think——'

'I might not go so far as that,' said the sergeant cautiously. 'Where on earth's that boy got to?' he asked of one of the men. 'Silly thing to do, to go and lose sight of him. Makes us look like I don't know what.'

'Want to see my Sid, sergeant?'

The sergeant shook his head negatively; the lad, hearing his name, came down the stairs from the first landing. The sergeant went to the front door and whistled; some one came along from the shop door and received orders in an undertone. 'And see if you can move yourself, for once,' advised the sergeant. The oil-lamp in the passage, annoyed by a sudden gust of air, flared up, blackening its chimney and smoking furiously. Janie Wills turned it down, and, resenting this, it did the most offensive act within its power, by going out. Sid on the staircase coughed.

'Run inside your new room,' ordered his mother. 'The smell's getting down your throat, dear. Besides, you can't be of any assistance.'

'What do you men want here?' he demanded, coming down. 'What right have you to come into my mother's house like this?'

'If you want an answer, my lad,' replied the sergeant, 'your mother can give it you in the morning. You pop off to bed, and say your prayers first, like a good young chap.'

'Is it anything to do with him?' he asked. The sergeant nodded, and went again to the open doorway. 'Mother,' said the boy severely, 'if you get yourself into any trouble through hiding that man, I'll never, never forgive you.'

'You mustn't worry about me, Sid.'

'Nice thing it would be, wouldn't it, at this new school for the other boys to see my mother's name in the police intelligence, and find out that she kept a laundry! I should never hear the last of it. They'd find a nickname for me!' He rubbed his sleeve across his eyes, and gave a sniff of self-compassion.

'Here's our boy, sergeant,' said one of the men at the open door.

'You're a nice one,' remarked the sergeant bitterly, as Johnnie Leadbetter, released suddenly from a policeman's grip, stumbled over the sill and into the dark passage. 'Thought you said I could rely on you?'

''Tisn't my fault,' protested Johnnie. 'It's the fault of my people. Jest because I called an uncle of mine by the name that's gen'rally applied to him, they wrenched off me boots and made me go to bed.'

'But you ought to have——'

'Didn't you tell me not to say a word to a soul? Very well then!' said Johnnie Leadbetter aggrievedly. 'What's the use of blowing hot and cold in

that manner for? Bring your bull's-eye lantern this way,' he added with importance.

'You don't want to go—to go down, sergeant, into that damp place again!'

'It's all right, Mrs. Galer. Everything comes in the day's work.'

'Mind this,' said Johnnie Leadbetter. The two lads had frowned at each other without a word; Johnnie turned his back on the other as he spoke, increasing the authoritativeness of his demeanour. 'I want you to understand this. That Mrs. Galer knows nothing of where he's hid hisself. No one knows, excepting me. And, of course, him. If I thought this was going to get Mrs. Galer into trouble I'd no more——'

'Get on, my lad,' said Sergeant Swanson. 'Deliver your lecture some other time.'

Mrs. Galer slipped by them and reached the cellar first. The light of the bull's-eye lantern danced around the walls; on the machines, on hills of damp clothes, on the pile of wood in the corner.

'Pull away all that,' commanded Johnnie Leadbetter, pointing.

'No!' cried Mrs. Galer. 'No! Please, no! You mustn't do that. I won't have you do that. Mr. Swanson, it isn't fair! Please, please!'

'Stand aside, mother,' said Sid. 'Don't make yourself conspicuous.'

The light of the bull's-eye lantern finished its waltz suddenly, and fixed itself on the high mountain of wood. The men started the avalanches; the bundles tumbled down.

'Am I—am I 'olding your hand too tight, Janie?'

'No, Mrs. Galer,' whispered the girl.

'New door, eh!' remarked the sergeant. 'Communicating with the neighbouring cellar. *I* see! Is there a key—— For goodness' sake keep that lamp steady. Hold it so that you can see yourself. No key on this side. Stick a pencil through, and—— No key on the other side? What ho, within there! No answer! Very well, force it open!'

'Sergeant!' screamed Mrs. Galer.

'One. Two. Three, and al-together.'

The door made no serious attempt to resist. The sergeant took the lantern and entered; the others stood back. One of the men patted Johnnie Leadbetter on the shoulder congratulatingly; the boy took off his cuffs as preparation for a struggle. Janie Wills bit her lips.

'Don't quite know,' said the sergeant, coming out and speaking deliberately, 'whether to pull your ear or not, Master Johnnie Leadbetter. What's very certain is that we owe an apology to our friend Mrs. Galer here.'

'Too bad,' declared Mrs. Galer, trying to laugh, 'to upset us like this and spoil the lock of my new door. And all for nothing!'

CHAPTER X

GOOD proof of affection on the part of her girls was shown by the fact that, fluent as they were in ordinary conversation, and free in expressing opinions, they spoke not a word in her presence on the subject of the captain's disappearance. This has to be placed to the credit of Milly Coates, who, having ascertained that the ladies of Kimmer Street, composing what she termed the glee party, were still discussing the matter with great appetite, gave a word of definite advice to the other girls, so that on any one of them being waylaid by curious neighbours on the road to work, or the road home, or interrogated by inquisitive customers in the shop, she at once assumed a look of blank stupidity that goaded the questioner near to hysteria, and in two cases resulted in a withdrawal of patronage.

'If I can't be treated,' said the disappointed ladies, 'with common civility, I 'll go elsewhere.'

This mattered the less because a laundry round in Meredith Street, some months later, having put up its shutters one evening, refrained from taking them down the next morning; the proprietress, who had acquired the habit of backing horses that

came in fourth, had, it appeared, taken her furniture away quietly and without fuss during the night on a barrow to begin life again in another part of London. Mrs. Galer held consultation with her landlord, bought two more small books for the extra ironers to make up on Saturday nights, and immediately the workmen took possession of the back garden, evicting Ballard, who found himself forced to take up a last desperate stand in window-boxes. Ballard lead that winter a life of great mystery, coming in to supper when on early and middle duty but two nights in the week; when on late duty he remained in his bedroom during the morning. If he washed at the sink, he demanded from Janie Wills the loan of the piece of pumice-stone; his expenses for tins of blacking became a serious matter. He had always been in the habit of bringing home a selection of the journals found in trains, and he noticed that when he was unable to include a newspaper which contained full police court intelligence, Mrs. Galer took the extreme course of sending Janie out to one of the shops where the captain had conducted his business of giving racing tips, in order to purchase a copy.

'Sh'd have thought,' said the railway-man to himself, 'that she might 'ave got him out of her mind by this time!'

With Ballard thus occupied; with old Mr. Leadbetter showing signs of deafness, which he declined to recognise, and with Sid away all day, Mrs. Galer and Janie Wills would have felt lonely, but for the increasing interest of the business. Mrs. Galer,

of late somewhat thinner of face, called the new extension a God-send (which, seeing that she had planned it all, seemed a generous phrase to use), and Janie, in view of the added work that came to her share in the house, made formal application to be allowed to roll up her hair at the back. Janie also argued the plea of years, and Mrs. Galer, in giving permission, declared that she, for her part, had no idea time was flying at this rate. Johnnie Leadbetter, a subdued young man since his failure as an amateur detective, expressed opinion that the new method constituted a decided improvement, in that Janie might now be taken for almost any age; Sid, rallied by his mother for making no comment on the alteration, said that he could not afford to bother his own head about those belonging to others, and told Janie to clean his bicycle.

'That's only his manner, dear,' said Mrs. Galer to the girl comfortingly. 'He's as much pleased with the change as any one, only he won't say so. Don't let him see that you're upset about it. Use my 'andkerchief!'

'I've—I've a good mind,' sobbed the girl, 'not to cut his sandwiches for him.'

'You mustn't talk like that, Janie,' urged Mrs. Galer, shocked. 'That's not the way to make yourself a popular favourite; is it, Miss Jeffrey?'

The dressmaker, in for a chat from next door, shook her head and fingered her brooch.

'There's some,' said Miss Jeffrey thoughtfully, 'that never get sought after at all; and then, again, there's some of us that get too much sought after.

One can't help feeling sorry for them. I expect I've told you about me and Mr. Grimsteed. *There* was a case of a young gentleman being gone on a young lady, if you like. His work took him away to the other side of the river, I believe, and I shouldn't wonder if he didn't die soon afterwards of a broken heart. At any rate *I* never heard of him again.'

'You've had your troubles,' remarked Mrs. Galer, 'the same as other people.'

'Wouldn't mind that,' said the dressmaker dolefully, 'if I could only feel that I hadn't been the innocent cause of so much trouble to others. That's what keeps me awake of nights. But there!' with a touch of recklessness, 'I can't help it if I am attractive. It isn't my fault. I'm sure if I had my time to live over again——'

'Well, well,' interrupted Mrs. Galer, '*you* mustn't begin to shed tears, or else I shall join in if you're not careful.'

'I don't believe,' said Miss Jeffrey, '(After you with that handkerchief, Janie Wills), I don't believe you know what it is to have a good cry.'

'I don't let anybody know that I know it,' replied the little woman.

The cold days in Clerkenwell, warning given by the notice, 'Boots clumped for the Winter,' resemble each other, but there came an evening when Ballard arrived home from King's Cross shaven, although the day was Wednesday, and steam coming up from the cellar grating. An event of the afternoon had been the fixing in the window of a sloping

board whereon some of the triumphs of starching and ironing could be exhibited, and half the street had been to inspect. Milly Coates had gone home indisposed; her husband loafed round to the laundry to mention that in his opinion, which he offered for what it was worth, women were nothing more or less than a nuisance. Ballard, rubbing his chin in an astonished way, asked what was the matter with the girl; Mrs. Galer replied that Milly would be away from work for two or three weeks if all went well, and the next girl would have to take her place for that period; it had happened rather awkwardly, but it could not be helped, and in any case it was of no use grumbling. Only there were so many to look after now, and one had to keep one's eyes open.

'I remember what Odger said once,' remarked old Leadbetter, in the slow way that had come to him of late, 'in speaking about much the same subject. He said that the monarchy and indeed the whole system——'

'I will not have it,' cried Mrs. Galer definitely, close to his ear. 'Not in my 'ouse. I 've told you before.'

'Beg pardon!'

'Oh, I 'm not cross,' she shouted, patting the old fellow's shoulder: 'but I *do* think you might make it up with Queen Victoria. You 're both getting on in years.'

'There 's a picture of her in that paper there that I 've brought for you,' remarked Ballard. 'Like her, too, strange to say.'

'You're surely not going to carry a personal quarrel like that to the grave?' urged Mrs. Galer.

The old man sat, his chin out defiantly. Ballard's deep voice did not reach his understanding, but he could hear Mrs. Galer well. It gratified him so much to think he was still looked on as a fighter, that he craned himself up and went slowly to the mantelpiece, where he enjoyed a good look at his reflection in the mirror. Ballard, who had been fidgeting with the lustres there and the china dog, moved away.

'Can't bear to see people always on the growl, Mr. Ballard. We all have our grievances, but talking about them only makes them grow. Besides, good luck may come at any moment.'

'My luck,' said Ballard, pleating the table-cloth, 'has all come at once.'

'Tell us!' she begged interestedly.

'Going out early this morning, I found a bunch of violets in Farringdon Road—real country violets, mind you—that took me back to the time when I used to go to an old woman's school, and if I was late, or if I didn't know the collec' of the day, I could always make it right with her by taking in a small bunch of flowers. There used to be a bank of 'em about as high as so——'

'That isn't all that's 'appened.'

'I took a bag for an old gentleman and put it into a first-class smoker for him, and he gave me 'alf-a-sov. in mistake for a tanner, and he said afterwards, when he made it two bob, that he hadn't come across honesty for three-and-twenty year.'

'As a matter of fact there isn't many——'

'Listen!' said Ballard dramatically. 'That's two strokes of luck. About half-past two, or it might have been two thirty-five—the two twenty-five hadn't been long gone, at any rate—inspector comes up to me and says, "Oh!" he says, "Ballard, you're wanted in the guvnor's office."'

The railway-man, knowing the value of deliberation in the telling of a story where you are certain of your point, paused and examined a tea-cup as though anxious to ascertain whether it were Sèvres or Worcester. Mrs. Galer looked up from her darning and gave the desired interrogatory.

'Thinks I to myself, "What 'ave I been doing to get into hot water? I 'aven't answered any passengers back when they've said things to me about the management of the line!" However, I knocked at the door, like this!'

'Yes, yes,' said Mrs. Galer, 'I know.'

'Voice said "Come in!"' Ballard slightly quickened the pace of the narrative. 'And I went in, you see, and the guvnor was there pitching in like one o'clock to a ticket-collector about some excess fares, and thinks I to myself, "Hullo!" thinks I——' Ballard saw Mrs. Galer's agreeable head preparing to look up again. 'Well, to make a long story short,' he said with a burst, 'I'm going to be made foreman porter!'

'Hooray!' cried Mrs. Galer, waving a sock. 'I *am* glad. Tell Mr. Leadbetter!'

The old man, when he had comprehended something of the information, took opportunity to thank

Providence that he had never suffered the indignity of wearing brass buttons; Ballard retorted to the effect that every one had to wear buttons, and the quality mattered little; he should now reconsider his decision of asking Leadbetter to be a third.

'Because, you know,' explained Ballard to his little landlady, 'I 'aven't told you the best of it. Things gen'rally go by threes, but this time there's a fourth. I've got orders for the Minstrels to-night. Orders for three. Front rows. Commence at eight P.M. I'll tell you how I got 'em. I had to go into the booking-office——'

'Now, let me see,' said Mrs. Galer interestedly, 'you'll take Sid and you'll take Janie Wills. They *will* enjoy themselves. I'll stay up and let you all in when you come back.'

'Don't suppose the boy would care for it,' argued Ballard. 'What I thought of was asking you to favour me with the pleasure of your company. We're not obliged to use the other ticket.'

'A sin to waste it. I'd much rather you took the two children.'

'And I'd rather take you.'

'Compliments are flying,' declared Mrs. Galer delightedly. 'Pity me and Janie can't leave the 'ouse together. What about Miss Jeffrey next door? Come now, Mr. Ballard, you were always rather sweet on Miss Jeffrey!'

'I wasn't!' protested the railway-man, reddening. 'I've never given her the slightest encouragement. If she's going about saying I 'ave, she's nothing more nor less than a story-teller.' Mrs. Galer

explained that she was only chaffing. 'Yes, well,' said Ballard, partially appeased; 'I don't want to get that sort of reputation. Not in your eyes, at any rate!'

They were ready to start half an hour later, and Ballard, out on the pavement, and trying to recall the methods the captain would have adopted in conducting an expedition of the kind, asked the two ladies first for views on the possibility of finding a hansom, and, second, on the amount which the driver would have the cheek to charge; but Mrs. Galer said she had been indoors all the day, and that she, for one, proposed to walk to the Agricultural Hall; the other two could do as they liked. Miss Jeffrey remarked that she was wearing thin shoes, but Ballard, saying it would take them but a few minutes, admitted that exercise was not half a bad thing. The dressmaker said Mr. Grimsteed (of whom they might perhaps have heard her talk) had often remarked, in the course of their private engagement, that if all went well they would, when they were married, set up a dog-cart of their own.

'But it was not to be,' remarked Miss Jeffrey sadly. 'Fate's a dreadful thing, when you come to consider it.'

'Then don't consider it,' urged Mrs. Galer.

'Can't help thinking of him,' sighed the dressmaker, 'when I'm out for the evening like this. What pains me most is to feel that he may be hunting all over the place for me, and advertising for me in newspapers that I don't come across.'

'You're living now where you did when you knew him.'

'But couldn't he mislay the address?'

'I'm quite sure,' declared Mrs. Galer emphatically, 'that I shouldn't waste my life over a person who went away and took no further notice of me. What do you say, Mr. Ballard?'

'Very glad to hear you express that opinion,' he said pointedly.

Mrs. Galer took charge of the slips of paper, and the other two stood back examining the framed photographs of coloured gentlemen, and trying to pretend that they had no anxiety in regard to the value of the orders. All the same, they showed relief on being beckoned by the little woman, and they went into the hall, where Ballard bought two programmes, which Mrs. Galer said was wasteful extravagance, and they looked over their shoulders with an air at the people who had paid to occupy shilling seats in the orange-scented room. Mrs. Galer wanted Ballard to sit between herself and Miss Jeffrey, saying that he could thus become a rose between two thorns; the railway-man, neglecting the opportunity for polite repartee, said he felt comfortable enough where he was, and remained at her side. The band began to play at once, with a flattering suggestion that it had been only waiting for their arrival; the curtain went up, and there was a semi-circle of men in evening dress, with frilled shirt-fronts, gleaming teeth, and every face black. The three sat within the glare of the footlights, and Bones, at one end, winking openly

at the two ladies, leaned forward and asked Miss Jeffrey for information concerning a non-existent younger sister — the knock-kneed one, explained Bones. The hall, giving its faith at once to Bones, roared appreciatively, and thenceforward Bones never did a single action or spoke a single word which was not accepted as a high and admirable flight of humour.

Miss Jeffrey sat upright, defying alike the aggressive humour of the corner-men and the insistent pathos of the others. It was only when the man at the centre (who had a deep voice and a laboriously dignified manner, and seemed to be the worst person in the Hall for guessing riddles)—it was only when this gentleman spoke that she referred hurriedly to the programme, and gave a murmur of self-commiseration on finding the name of the interlocutor given there.

'Anything the matter?' asked Mrs. Galer. The little woman was giving herself up to enjoyment; Ballard showing appreciation of the jokes somewhat tardily; it seemed to take him about a minute and a half to see each point. 'What you looking so flurried about?'

'I thought—I thought for the moment that I 'd come across a ghost.'

'Ghosts are white,' said Mrs. Galer.

'Perhaps it 's my imagination,' said Miss Jeffrey faintly. 'I believe a chocolate would pull me together.'

Whilst Ballard went out to purchase a restorative, Miss Jeffrey peered forward, endeavouring to re-

assure herself, but it proved impossible to detect features. Bones, misinterpreting her intentions, invited her to take a seat on his lap, and this was received by the Hall as a pure extract of the finest and most precious drollery. Miss Jeffrey thereupon sat back, whispering to Mrs. Galer that it seemed extraordinary to find, wherever she happened to be, somehow or other it was her fate to be selected for public recognition; a great drawback this, for it made one disinclined to set foot out of doors. Mrs. Galer suggested the usefulness of a thick veil, and Miss Jeffrey replied that she had once tried this experiment with deplorable results, for a gentleman in Old Street, walking on the opposite side of the way, had on that occasion lifted his hat and bowed to her; she had never felt so much confused in all her born days. 'If he'd crossed over,' said Miss Jeffrey pathetically, 'I should simply have fainted right clean off.'

The dressmaker revived on being presented by Ballard with a paper bag of sweets; and, the first part of the entertainment being over, and the curtain down in preparation for the sketches which were to follow, she repaid him by continuing to engage Mrs. Galer in conversation, although the railway-man showed clearly, by preliminary coughs and by strenuous tightening of necktie, that he had something of importance to say. Miss Jeffrey, fanning herself with her programme, mentioned that she was inclined to look upon entertainments of the kind with favour, providing they did not go too far; indeed, she herself had at one time had

some thoughts of going on the stage, and would have done so only that she lacked confidence. Not, mind you, as a dancer or a singer, or anything low and common; what she had vaguely contemplated was playing in some piece where all the men were in love with her, and she remained true to her sailor lad. Miss Jeffrey had become tearful at the thought of the brilliant success she would have achieved had she not been safeguarded by shyness, when the curtain went up, the hall cried 'Sh-s-sh,' and everybody told everybody in a noisy way to hold their row. Scene, a registry-office. Interlocutor of the early part of the programme had discarded austerity, and clothed in a long white gown, wearing a large blonde wig, and his face washed, sat near at a desk prepared to receive the visits of lady clients requiring servants. He had but just begun to explain the plot, making no effort to make voice accord with costume, when Miss Jeffrey suddenly clutched at Mrs. Galer's arm.

'Oh, this is too terrible,' she cried.

'Now, begin again,' said Mrs. Galer.

'It *is* him,' wailed Miss Jeffrey. 'My sweetheart when a boy—a girl, I mean. And I 'd given him up as lost.'

People in the seats behind urged that the lady should postpone her scene until the other entertainment had finished.

'I must go,' declared Miss Jeffrey weakly. 'I can't bear it. The shock 's too much for me. You come, too!'

'No fear!' interposed Ballard. 'You bunk off if

you like, but you leave her 'ere. Every one's pleasure isn't going to be spoilt jest to please you.'

Compromise effected by Mrs. Galer's suggestion that she should see Miss Jeffrey out to the vestibule, where the dressmaker could wait until the performance terminated, and recover herself. Mrs. Galer was full of news on her return, and between the sketches and the dances and the soprano singer, who betrayed sex by three deep notes at end ('Even took me in!' admitted Ballard), she explained that Miss Jeffrey had discovered in the company the Mr. Grimsteed of whom she had frequently spoken. Miss Jeffrey, resting on a lounge and becoming composed with decorous deliberation, had begged that he should not be told of her presence, saying the shock had been bad enough for her, it would be simply terrible for him, but Mrs. Galer told Ballard that *her* idea was that some one should find the side-door presently, to leave word for him in his stage name to come round to the front of the house; by this means they would have the satisfaction of bringing the two together.

'Talking about loving 'earts——' began Ballard.

'And you must help,' said Mrs. Galer, with animation. 'He isn't on the programme for the last sketch, so you pop out and bring him round. Don't say a word to her, mind. Let it be a surprise. I like to see people happy.'

'What about yourself?'

'That follows!' she replied.

The dressmaker, rather proud of herself with the red plush background, seemed to have recovered,

but she exhibited fresh signs of agitation on seeing her friend, and announcing willingness to return home at once, said dolorously that she could now well understand how people's hair changed colour in a single night. To think that she should have found him after all these years of waiting! To think that imagining him to be at the other end of the world, or of London rather, she should find him within, as one might say, a stone's-throw of her own street! How it brought back the dear gone days. Miss Jeffrey hinted that they really did not bear retrospection.

'Baby is what he used to call me,' she said tearfully.

'He'll call you baby again,' said Mrs. Galer, 'if you don't leave off crying!'

'Let's go!'

'We needn't 'urry,' said Mrs. Galer, beaming at herself privately in the mirror-covered walls. 'We must wait for Mr. Ballard.'

'I want to get home,' urged the dressmaker faintly, 'and think it over calmly. I shall go through his bundle of letters to-night and read them one by one——'

'Here they are!' cried Mrs. Galer. 'Now we're going to leave you two together to talk over old times.'

Mrs. Galer walked in the direction of The Angel and its busy traffic, going quickly, because, in her opinion, it was not good that a woman with a business like hers should be seen at such a corner and at such an hour. Ballard, unhampered by the

nicer refinements of behaviour, had stayed behind to watch the first incidents of the meeting, promising to catch her up before she had gone half a yard. At the Pentonville Hill side of the corner a raucous-voiced woman was singing, one foot pressing open the door of the saloon bar; she finished, and twanged a few chords on her banjo. Mrs. Galer, recognising her, wanted to speak, desiring keenly to ask one question; but the remembrance of their last meeting restrained her. She reached the other side of the tram-lines, and had but just eluded the ardent attentions of a foolish City youth afflicted with the idea that he had a reputation to keep up for gallantry, when Ballard came, puffing and panting with the run, in the manner of an exhausted locomotive.

'Go' bless my soul!' cried Ballard. 'I wouldn't 'ave missed it for a pension. You ought to 'ave stopped.'

'Couples don't want anybody looking on.'

'That never occurred to me,' admitted Ballard. They turned into the comparative quiet of St. John Street Road. 'Don't let's go so fast, I'm winded.' She went slowly for a few steps, but soon resumed her usual quick pace. 'I've got a lot to tell you, one way and another.'

'Did he dance with delight when he saw her?'

'That wouldn't be quite a fair description of what took place. What 'appened was this. I went round and sent in for him, and waited, and presently out he come. I said, "How are you?" and he said, "How are you?"'

'Well, well!'

'I explained what I'd called about, without telling him too much, because I thought I'd better play up a bit artful, you see, just in case, and he seemed rather undecided at first, and he asked me if she answered to the name of Watkins——'

'Do get on. You're the slowest man in conversation I ever come across.'

'As you went out,' said Ballard, cutting down, with a sigh of regret, a wide overgrowth of details, 'she rose up from the sofa or whatever you like to call it. He 'eld out his 'and like this, and he said, "I remember you quite well," and she never said a word, and he goes on to say, "I met you once, and only once, at a party in Great Percy Street, years ago, just when I was beginning to sing." So she says (I fancy she thought I'd gone out after you), "Do you remember my reciting?" And he says, "Do I not? Don't think I've ever laughed so much since." She turned round and she says, "But it was a serious recitation," and he says, "I know!" She never said nothing for a bit, and he said, "Well, I must be going; remember me to your aunt." Miss Jeffrey she says in her sharp way, "'Aven't got a aunt," and he says, "Well, if ever you do 'ave a aunt, remember me to her." And off he goes.'

'Don't see anything to laugh at,' remarked Mrs. Galer reprovingly; 'I feel rather sorry for her. She deceived me about it, certainly; but I can quite understand that anybody who's never had any attentions paid to them might well try and believe that she had, and to make other people

believe it, too. Life's pretty hard, Mr. Ballard, on some women. Mind you don't let her know that we know. See to that.'

'I was under the impression,' said Ballard apologetically, 'that the affair had a certain amount of humour about it.'

'A man's way of looking at it.'

'Bother you too much, would it, if we went a bit further down, and then turned back?' Ballard gave his necktie another twist. 'Got something I want to say to you.'

'It's late,' said Mrs. Galer. 'You take a walk; I can run home by myself.'

They turned into Spencer Street.

'I shall be getting my twenty-three bob a week now,' he said. 'Besides what I make. And what I want to suggest is this. Mind you, it's only a suggestion!'

'That's one of the newspaper shops where he used to sell his racing tips,' she remarked. 'That one, over the road. I've just been reminded of him.'

Ballard stopped in the statement which he was about to make, induced by a tremor in her voice. At Kimmer Street he opened the front door for her, and said in his slow way that he didn't know that it would do him any particular harm if he strolled down to the corner and stood himself a glass.

CHAPTER XI

BOB COATES said it might be all very well, but he had understood that an Englishman's house was his castle; the argument applied, he believed, equally to an Englishman's two rooms; right was right and wrong was wrong; he counted himself amongst those who knew how many beans made five. These things Mr. Coates said with generous use of a double-barrelled adjective indispensable apparently to free and emphatic argument. He repeated all the statements in various bars, it being a well-known fact, but mysterious, in regard to the Bob Coateses of town, that mere circumstance of earning no wages has little to do with ability to purchase beer. A candid barmaid at one of the houses being asked to express a word of agreement, asked why in the name of goodness he did not set to and earn some money for himself; Bob Coates on this remarked that if you wanted good sound common sense it seemed a sheer waste of time to go to a woman for it.

Principally he blamed Mrs. Galer. She it was who had counselled him to go away and lose himself for a few hours; she it was who had found a nurse; she it was who had cleared out the living-

room (having an eternal vendetta against dust and dirt, and never able to bring herself to effect reconciliation with these enemies); Bob Coates declared bitterly that the place no longer resembled a home. Mrs. Galer, with the extra work at the laundry, and the necessity for keeping a wary eye on opportunities for picking up second-hand machines at a moderate figure, nevertheless found time to come round of an evening and allow nurse to go out for a breath of what Clerkenwell calls fresh air, and read to Milly the weekly instalment of a serial story, in which for the past few months the girl had been interested. Milly, searching for some means of repayment, said she had determined that the Christian name selected should be either Mrs. Galer's, or, in the other case, that of Sid. Nurse, on her return one evening, found Mrs. Galer describing with enthusiasm her boy's triumphant progress up the ladder of education.

'Why,' cried the young nurse, taking off her cloak, 'I have heard all about him.'

'Expect people are beginning to talk,' said the proud mother.

'My brother, Mr. Bryant, is a great friend of his.'

'This *is* a small world,' declared Mrs. Galer. 'I'm looking forward so to the time when he'll begin to take an interest in the business.'

'I see!' remarked the nurse.

'The way he'll be able to keep the books! Janie Wills is good at it, but she now and again makes a mistake in the odd 'a'pence.'

'I've met him once or twice at my brother's,

but he has never happened to say what his people were. Otherwise I should have identified you at once.'

'Expect he's had a lot of other things to talk about. I was telling Milly that the very latest is that he's joined a debating society at the schools. One of my lodgers took him the other evening to a discussion on a forum or something—don't profess to understand these matters meself—and old Mr. Leadbetter admitted that my Sid talked them all off their legs. Quoted Blue-books and goodness knows what all. His father was a good talker in his best days. Rare flow of language he had, to be sure.'

''Ope mine 'll grow up like yours,' said Milly.

Mrs. Galer rallied the patient on her ambitious desires, but nurse, a serious young woman, declared everything depended on the mother and the way she brought up her child; there was small reason why Milly, if she were spared, should not know all the satisfaction that now belonged to Mrs. Galer. Meanwhile there must be less talk, if you please, and Mrs. Galer could go and make up the chair-bedstead in the other room for the aggrieved Mr. Coates. That gentleman came in presently, discontented at finding himself sober, expressing once more the opinion that he was being treated as though he were so much dirt. Mrs. Galer, asking how he expected to be treated, ordered him sharply to wash his hands and face and moderate his voice, and gave him, not for the first time, her views on his life and general conduct. Bob Coates said in a

whimper that perhaps, when he was gone, people would discover his good points; but Mrs. Galer denied that this came within the range of possibility.

'You're a worthless, good-for-nothing imitation of a man,' whispered Mrs. Galer indignantly, 'and if it was any affair of mine I should tell you so. I've got no room for such as you.'

'Wish every one wasn't so prejudiced against me,' said Mr. Coates desolately; 'I can't 'elp me misfortunes.'

'You 'elp 'em all you can.'

'And that's the sympathy you get,' he remarked bitterly, addressing the oil-lamp. ''Pon me word, if it isn't enough to make a man give up trying!'

Sid received the news of his mother's encounter with Mr. Bryant's sister with no show of satisfaction. He hoped his mother had made none of her mistakes in grammar in the course of the conversation; she replied that she could not remember having committed any of the errors in speech which he had of late pointed out; he hinted that this was a matter on which he could feel no sort of confidence. (The increase in mannishness secretly gratified his mother, although she sometimes openly protested against it; occasions when she felt bound to reprove him for an assurance exceeding his years, she always recounted afterwards to the girls with great pride.) Nothing, he argued, diverted people so much as to observe errors in speech made by others; he begged her to be very careful to avoid the common error of finishing a sentence with a preposition.

'How can I manage it,' she protested, 'when I don't know what a preposition is?'

'If it comes to that,' said Janie Wills courageously, 'you're not always right, Sid. When you came in this evening and I said, "Who is it?" you answered, "Me."'

'Accommodating myself to my surroundings,' said the lad importantly.

'Three year ago,' remarked the girl, 'I should have taken your head and banged it up against the wall.'

'The word "up" in that sentence is quite unnecessary.'

'Same might be said of some of the rest of us.'

'Children, children!' cried Mrs. Galer sharply, 'I will not have all this bickerin'. You don't seem to be able to meet, nowadays, but what you begin to spar. Sid, go upstairs to your room, like a dear. Janie, I want you in the shop.'

'Well,' protested the lad, 'make her leave off answering me. She's got no right to be here, as a matter of fact.'

'Oh yes, she has,' retorted his mother, 'and if she hadn't, it isn't for you to say so. She's a very good girl, Janie Wills is, although I say it to her face, and one day, when she grows up, she'll make somebody a good, busy wife. You may laugh, Sid, but you see if my words don't come true.'

He looked doubtfully at the tall girl. It has to be recorded that Janie Wills made a grimace.

'And now shake 'ands.'

'Hands, mother!'

'Oh, I expect I'm too old to begin to speak properly now,' she replied, with cheerfulness. 'Unless you get the trick when you're young, it's no use. I used to know a 'bus conductor—he was a cousin of your poor father's—and they laughed at him so for saying "'Ighgate Archway" that he set to and learned how to say it properly. And then they laughed at him more than ever.'

'Just as well we haven't many relations.'

'Your dear father on his father's side was well connected, to tell the truth. Only that they never somehow cottoned to work, and they tried to do without it. The best one amongst them called himself an agent, but he never did any of it.'

The boy swung himself round.

'We mustn't be quite so sharp with him, Janie,' recommended Mrs. Galer, when he had stamped his way up the stairs. 'He's got a bit of a temper that comes from my side, I s'pose. Soon as we've finished the books, you and me—or is it you and I?—we'll set to and make something nice and tasty for poor Milly Coates. I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she has a hard time of it.'

'S'posing she don't——'

'Janie Wills,' severely, 'how often have I told you not to curtsey to trouble until it comes round the corner!'

Mr. Bob Coates, having at length, in speaking at the bar, announced his determination to set to and do something to show that he was not of those who can be trodden upon with impunity, his assertion (the usual target being absent and the company

desiring some objective for satirical shafts) encountered elaborate pretence of incredulity; it was hinted by a ham-and-beef shop man, who had hereditary right to a seat on a cask in the corner between the hours of ten and eleven, that nothing short of dynamite would make Bob Coates take definite action. Bob retorted with a reference to an egg, which he had once, in the days of youth, bought from the shopkeeper. The latter replied that the anecdote was old and stale; and Bob said that in this respect it, at any rate, resembled his purchase. Encouraged by unexpected success in the game, Bob became too daring in his advance. The ham-and-beef shop man, with the knowledge that eyes of Clerkenwell were seeing, and that ears of Clerkenwell were listening, slipped from his seat, and, coming to closer quarters, threw threepence on the wooden counter. Invited Bob to plank down a similar sum, and, this done with the reluctance that Mr. Coates always showed in disbursing any money not immediately repaid in drink, announced himself willing to bet the sum that by the time the fortnight ended Bob would, so far as personal action was concerned, be found exactly where he stood now. The publican, a lordly man, one who always wore silk hat and frock-coat when on the other side of the counter, and whose frown cleared the bar on the moment of half-past twelve, was good enough to unbend and accept the duties of referee, stake-holder, and judge; intimating, however, that the case being exceptional should not hereafter be referred to as precedent. Bob Coates,

elated by the honour paid to him, but not quite clear about the conditions of the wager, strutted out of the place, determined to do something which should gain for him the respect of his friends and secure the amount that had been wagered. Rarely a man to act hurriedly, he nevertheless saw that here was a case demanding rapidity of action, and collecting a few articles from the front room at home without exciting the attention of the serious young nurse, he set out. The result proved a warning to him against impetuosity for the rest of his life.

For not until some time later, when a rumour reached him at Brentford that a warrant was likely to be issued against him for leaving his wife and the new baby chargeable to the parish of Islington, did he recognise (and then only on the fact being pointed out to him by a new lady friend) the impossibility of returning to claim the amount of the wager and to receive the congratulations of his friends.

'I'm ingenious,' said Bob Coates regretfully, 'but it seems to me I'm not quite ingenious enough.'

Nurse Bryant had to put on her wings and fly away at the first possible opportunity, because her services were always in demand. The Registrar-General depends a good deal for certain of his figures on the warrens of Clerkenwell, it being a rule of life that additions shall be made recklessly wherever the opportunities for existence are slightest. She settled for a moment at the house where Milly's mother now lived, and gave that woman

a few quick, definite suggestions. Milly's mother replied, without any pretence of amiability, that rather than move hand or foot to help her daughter she would see the whole world, herself excepted, go to perdition. She remembered now (although no one else could recall the circumstance) that she had prophesied events exactly as they occurred, hinted that she did not feel inclined to spoil a reputation for long sight by interfering with the arrangements made by Providence. The young nurse, accustomed to curtness, and not altogether unacquainted with ingratitude, winged her way from the front door with more than her usual swiftness. Afterwards she blamed herself for not sparing five minutes of her good time in a flight to Mrs. Galer's shop.

'Here's some one to see you, Thirteen,' they said in the ward of the infirmary. 'Thought you said you had no friends?'

'There's only—only Mrs. Galer.'

'And Mrs. Galer it is!' cried the visitor, bending down. 'Why in the world didn't some one tell me —I've been thinking you were an unkind girl not to have come back to work! Called there two or three times, and rang all the bells, and couldn't make no one hear.'

'I was alone,' said Milly. 'All alone in the 'ouse. With one exception,' she added, with about half of a proud smile at a small bundle near.

'Understood he'd gone right away.'

'I don't mean that man,' said the young mother. 'I mean this one.'

'The lil' dear!' cried Mrs. Galer, pulling back the shawl gently. 'Let me have him jest for a while.'

'Rather not, if you don't mind, Mrs. Galer. You see—you see, I shan't have him for long.'

'Nonsense! He's going to grow up into a great big man, and be a soldier in the Life Guards and ride on a great big black 'orse. That's what you're going to do, my lord!' The baby showed excusable signs of astonishment. 'Whatever makes you think he's not going to last, Milly?'

'It isn't him,' said the girl faintly.

Some of the other red-jacketed patients were sitting up in their beds, waiting anxiously for visitors, and one or two of these hailed Mrs. Galer, whom they knew. The little woman bustled down the ward, and told them they were looking as well as anything, congratulated them on their great good luck in being indoors out of the rain, rallied them on artfulness in affecting to be indisposed. She had recovered her usual composure by the time she returned; two of the attendants nodded an intimation that she must not stay too long by Milly Coates's bedside.

'Somehow or other,' said the girl, 'I don't mind it a bit. Not a little bit. Everything's got into such a muddle!'

'Why, that's just where the fun comes in,' declared Mrs. Galer. 'You reelly mustn't give in like this, dear. It's almost wicked.'

'I don't care! Not much, at any rate. Shouldn't care at all if it wasn't for him.' She pressed her

thin face against the head of the mite in her arms. 'Wish I could take him with me.'

'Hush!'

'I was going to 'ave him christened Sidney, and I was going to 'ave him grow up like your boy; only that I meant to keep the upper 'and over him. And now——'

Mrs. Galer found her handkerchief, and patted the girl's eyes.

'You ain't often seen me blubber,' whispered Milly, sobbing. 'Shouldn't cry now only that I feel so weak. Seems all the time as though I'm slipping.' Mrs. Galer took her hand. 'There's one thing I wanted to ask you to tell me. How are they getting on in that running story?'

'He hasn't actually proposed this week,' said Mrs. Galer, with animation, 'but Lady Mary has given him a rose, and he's encouraged by that; and he swears that all through the war he'll never, never part with it, and he asks whether, supposin' he comes back safe and sound, he may venture to call upon her.'

'What did she say?'

'There it finishes,' explained Mrs. Galer. 'That's where it ends up for this week.'

'I sh'd like to have known,' said the girl wistfully —'I sh'd like to have known for certain that they got married. They've had such a lot to go through, poor things.'

'I'm keepin' your place open, Milly, against you come back.'

'Yes,' she said slowly. 'Don't fill it up, Mrs.

Galer, till I'm gone. You've always been partic'larly good to me; only I never admitted it. Shan't bother you much longer.'

'Don't you imagine for one moment that we're going to let you go off like this. Why, with this dear little slip of baby——'

'Mrs. Galer!'

'Yes, dear.'

'Ben' down, will you?'

Mrs. Galer's under lip trembles as she listens to the girl's appeal. She puts her hand to her mouth for a moment.

'If that should be the case,' she says tenderly, 'why, of course, he shan't go there. I was going to suggest that. I feel as though I want some one to be fond of. And you may be sure, dear, that I'll be a mother to the little rascal, if so be that you can't.'

CHAPTER XII

INCIDENTS occurred which prevented for some time a meeting in Kimmer Street to discuss local affairs. Number Twenty-Eight, leader in entertaining and one who gave the note, went away to the seaside for a week, and this Kimmer Street felt prepared to tolerate, whilst considering three days enough to satisfy reasonable desire for change, but when Number Twenty-Eight on her return bragged of the people she had met at the boarding-house, of bank clerks and their wives, of folk who lived in the suburbs and kept two servants, and went on to hint that sooner or later she and her husband would have to consider the advisability of moving in the direction of Kentish Town, then Kimmer Street met privately and decided that it did not care to be looked down upon by any one. On Number Twenty-Eight sending invitations out by her little girl ('Please, Mrs. What-is-it, will you drop in s'afternoon and 'ave a cup o' tea 'long o' mother?') answers were returned by the messenger, variously worded, but all to the effect that they did not propose to avail themselves of the offer, and that Number Twenty-Eight was at liberty to entertain herself at her tea-party.

Later, came the incident of Number Twenty-Two, once a vivacious contributor to general and particular information, suddenly (in the phrase of the neighbourhood) turning chapel, and in this new character denouncing the pleasing exchange of news as backbiting and the slandering of neighbours, quoting texts in support of her newly acquired views. Time cleared away some of these troubles, and here was Number Twenty-Eight restored from ambition, at peace with Kimmer Street, and entertaining a wisely chosen party of neighbours, where none had any known grievance against another; there remained the question of a newcomer at Sixteen, a large lady with hair of such uncertain colour that one could not help thinking it had been made the subject of experiments. To celebrate restoration of peace, the best table-cloth appeared; the hostess had tactfully removed from the mantelpiece an elephant studded with shells and labelled, 'Souvenir of Clacton-on-Sea.'

'Clerkenwell seems to be getting its name up again,' said the hostess cheerfully. 'Three inquests in the paper this morning.'

'Good ones?'

'Not over and above,' admitted the hostess. 'Just ordinary. Royal engagement announced, I was very glad to see.'

'Now let us think,' said one of the visitors, arresting her cup in mid-air and setting it down that it might not interfere with an exercise of memory. 'What relation is this princess to the wife of the Queen's second son? He married—I remember it

as though it was only yesterday—he married——' The intricate subject was discussed at full length; there proved to be a difficulty in arriving at a definite decision. The lady from Number Sixteen, drawn into the conversation, hinted with austerity that she knew the facts, but did not care to waste them. 'I must pop across this evening,' said the lady, who had offered the inquiry, 'and ask Mrs. Galer.'

Something like a purr of satisfaction went around the room. Now they were at close quarters with a subject that never failed.

'You've 'eard the latest, I s'pose? What,' cried the hostess, trying to conceal her satisfaction, 'don't tell me you weren't none of you out and about early this morning! Oh, you never saw such a performance in all your life. Talk about Royalty, why Royalty isn't in it! I'd a good mind to call out something, but then, again, I thought I wouldn't; doesn't do to interfere with other people's affairs; besides which, she's one of those women who's always ready with an answer. She'll be having her picture in the Royal Academy next.'

The guests begged urgently that they should be informed of the details of Mrs. Galer's new offence.

'I was doing my hair,' explained the hostess, 'at the time, so that what I saw, I saw through the blinds, you understand. Wished I'd done what I intended to do, and given the windows a bit of a rub yesterday, but still I don't think I missed

much. First of all there was me lady fussing about rather more than usual, and all her girls in clean aprons, and young Johnnie Leadbetter bringing out the two new hand-carts, with her name and the Victoria Laundry newly painted on them. A 'ansom cab was going 'ome to the stables, and she stops him and evidently asks whether he'd mind waiting there for a few minutes.'

'Whatever for?'

'*I* couldn't tell at the time, any more than you can now, but gradually—the hostess gave a dramatic gesture with a piece of cake—'gradually it began to dawn upon me. He was supposed to have driven up a gentleman who had called to see if his collar was ready.'

'But why——'

'I'm telling you fast as I can. Unless I give it to you all in order, jest as I saw it, I shall go and omit something. Out comes Ballard in his uniform, and she takes him and sets him at the end of the shop window. Then she groups her girls—all on the giggle, of course—groups them round the doorway at the corner, leaving room for herself at the centre. Say the fireplace was the shop door and this pair of tongs was Mrs. Galer!'

The guests intimated that their mind's eye saw the situation clearly.

'It was more like a pantomime than anything else I can compare it to. Mrs. Galer running about and putting everybody in their places, calling young Janie Wills and deciding where she had to stand. Johnnie Leadbetter seemed to want to be next

her, but the girl wouldn't hear of it. Presently Mrs. Galer goes in and brings out his lordship.'

'Ah!'

'But no! Oh, dear, no! Wouldn't hear of it for a moment. His mother begged and prayed of him, but he gave a kind of a twitch, and got away from her and went back indoors again.'

'If a son of mine dared disobey me like that, I hope that, with the 'elp of 'Eaven,' said one of the matrons piously, 'I should succeed in breaking every bone in his body.'

'Then Mrs. Galer seemed to remember something. Sends Janie Wills in, and out she comes presently with the baby. Milly Coates's baby.'

'Bright little kid, that.'

'Mrs. Galer takes the baby, and talks to it, and tickles its face, and all the girls wanted to come and have a word with it; but she told them to keep exactly where they was, and not so much as wink. And jest as I had at last decided that everybody was stark, raving mad except meself, up comes a young man with brown finger-nails, and a machine on three legs and a cloth over the top, and I could see it all.'

'Who *is* this person, pray?' The lady from Number Sixteen found herself compelled to open a window in her wall of reserve, the others hastened to convey information. 'Things have changed with me,' she said, shaking her ambiguously coloured head with a retrospective air. 'What my friends would say if they thought I was mixing with that sort of person, doesn't bear thinking of.' Number Sixteen sighed and shifted back her chair.

'And no doubt,' went on the hostess—'no doubt in the world but what she'll 'ave one of the photographs framed and placed in the window.'

'Never saw a woman quite so proud of herself and everything about her. To catch sight of her now and again, one would think she was just exactly what she wanted to be.'

'We all know what goeth before a fall,' said one of the ladies. 'Shakespeare wasn't far out.'

They passed up their cups and saucers in an absent-minded way, watching the increasing paleness of the beverage as the hostess tilted the teapot. Some one broke the silence by remarking that those who lived the longest would see the most; this was well received, as putting the whole matter fearlessly and definitely. The lady, encouraged, told of a relative of hers by marriage now getting on well in the undertaking line in Somers Town; but it appeared that the anecdote, though interesting, was not illustrative, and recognising the general feeling the lady gave up the story about half-way. The hostess asked whether Parliament had been up to any more of its nonsense. The tea-party seemed scantily informed in regard to political matters, and the hostess closed the newly opened subject with an aspiration for the return to life of Lord Beaconsfield.

'Be rights, you know, she's no business to have let her boy go in for that scholarship and win it in the way he did. I saw by the papers that they were intended for children of parents who couldn't afford to pay for expensive schooling.'

'There's a lot of dodgery going on,' agreed the hostess, emptying the contents of the teapot into the coalbox ostentatiously. 'There ought to be a society to look after it.'

'How's your lad getting along at the reformatory, ma'am?'

'They don't punish him enough,' replied the hostess, 'or else he'd be as good as gold.'

'My second girl came 'ome the other evening with the news that Sid Galer was wearing a silk hat. I told her that it was her fault. In my young days we girls wouldn't have let it stay on his head for more than 'alf a second.'

'He's getting very stand-offish, that lad. One of mine said that she threw a piece of orange-peel at him the other day, and he took no notice. Never threw it back.'

The lady from Number Sixteen, apparently bored by the tone of the discussion, yawned, placing her hand to her mouth in a refined way when she had finished. The hostess expressed a hope that they were not keeping her up; the lady from Number Sixteen retorted that she could be bright and lively enough if she but found herself in congenial company. Hostess, pained by this, said that if the newcomer felt the present company to be too superior, the only thing they could do would be to endeavour to talk down to her level. The lady from Number Sixteen gave an answer without words.

'You've got a nasty cough, ma'am.'

'Good enough for a place like this,' she said haughtily.

'Isn't Clerkenwell up to your mark?'

Number Sixteen declared heatedly she had not come there to be insulted. She had hitherto lived in neighbourhoods where she had been treated as a lady (excepting at one place in Fulham, and that was the fault of the landlord); it had been reserved for Clerkenwell to—— Number Sixteen burst into tears, and the company concentrated efforts in order to make peace, arguing that both parties were right to a certain extent; that on the one hand a lady who had lived the best part of her life in the West End could not be expected to assimilate at once all the manners and customs of Clerkenwell; on the other, the hostess had title to resent any suggestion that what was good enough for her should not be good enough for any one else. The hostess said too much importance must not be placed on words uttered by her when her paddy was up; she herself had the habit, in such a case, of forgetting what she had said the moment afterwards. Might she be allowed to inspect the lace handkerchief with which her lady friend was patting an eye carefully? She had had such a handkerchief once in her youthful time, but it had disappeared somehow. The hostess, finding herself near to reopening the quarrel, begged piteously that she might not be misunderstood, and urged Number Sixteen to bring her chair nearer to the fireplace and tell them all how she had obtained it.

'A present, I expect,' said the hostess encouragingly. 'You must 'ave had your fair share of good

looks, you know, in your day. Course you 've gone off a bit since.'

They crowded round, and the talk went on in undertones. The lady from Number Sixteen, now in the position of superiority that she felt was rightly hers, blended confidence with stateliness, and, under seal of the most precisely worded assurance of secrecy, told them incidents of a lively and variegated past, forgetting she was but furnishing powder and shot that would be used against her in some future engagement. Number Sixteen in an exultant frame of mind following on the quarrel, declined to reserve any secrets; the women sat round listening eagerly, with occasional interjections.

'Well, well, *well!*'

'Some of 'em know how to make the money fly.'

'*Real* champagne?'

'Shows you what titled people are!'

'Well I never!'

The hostess made one or two efforts to speak of Clacton, but the others begged her to keep quiet. Some one asked presently, with elaborate safeguarding of phrases that no offence might be taken, why Number Sixteen had given it all up; she replied that it had given her up. She compared the attractions of Kimmer Street of an evening with the attractions of Brompton Road; the hostess found herself compelled to point out that Kimmer Street claimed to be respectable. The newcomer retorted that it seemed a pity one could not be respectable without being dull. They begged her not

to take a melancholy view of the situation, pointing out that she, at any rate, could fairly claim to have had her day; moreover, Kimmer Street was not without incident, and quite well-bred people sometimes lived there. Mrs. Galer's captain, for instance.

'Captain? Why, at the time I'm speaking of, I couldn't move for fear of stepping on a captain.'

'Ah, but,' urged the hostess, 'there was a gentleman if you like. A better mannered man I never wish to come across. Always lifting his hat to somebody or other. I used to think she was fond of him—but there! She's so reserved in her manner that I defy any one to tell. She isn't like other people.'

'What made him leave the neighbourhood?' asked the newcomer, resenting the claims of a rival. 'Oh,' she said ironically, on being furnished with the information. 'Oh, indeed. Well, this I can say for myself; I was never in any difficulty with the police.'

'That's where luck comes in,' remarked the hostess.

'Miss Jeffrey's just gone by,' reported a lady at the window. 'Looking as pleased as Punch about something. She never used to be like that.'

'Don't you know why?'

This was the best of news in Kimmer Street: that, whenever a subject had been used and thrown away, another, quite fresh and new, immediately appeared, so that you could never complain with strict fairness of a dearth of topics; there

remained, ever and always, Mrs. Galer's business. And here, as the newcomer completed her turn and edged back her chair, flushed with the excitement of talk, and head trembling with the knowledge that she had asserted her position, here came the adventure of the dressmaker to be told, to be confirmed in parts, to be amended in others, and truth (or something even more interesting than truth) to be arrived at in the result. Several versions existed of the incident, but the one circumstance about which there could be no dispute was that Miss Jeffrey had some time since found a young gentleman—not really young, and perhaps not quite the gentleman, but still, better than nothing—and Miss Jeffrey had discarded the look of anxiety which she had so long worn. That the dressmaker's alleged love-affairs had always concerned those who had left the neighbourhood, or had left this world, was a detail that had not escaped observation, and incredulity had been expressed more than once. Some one who lived next door to Miss Jeffrey had overheard a conversation, or parts of a conversation——

'They make the walls so thick,' complained the lady, 'in these old-fashioned 'ouses.'

Able therefore to inform the tea-party of certain particulars that made it about the rummiest go she, for her part, had ever encountered. Miss Jeffrey had, it appeared, secured her man by strategy, which the company present found no difficulty in denouncing. The previous engagements had no firmer bases than those afforded by her own invention; the dressmaker had urged in her defence, that

she could not bear that people should think she had been overlooked. This appeared reasonable enough; the part of the story which justified the adjective applied to it by Miss Jeffrey's neighbour was, that on one of the alleged sweethearts being discovered, the dressmaker had made an appeal, a successful appeal to his finer instincts. A man (said Miss Jeffrey's neighbour) may black his face, and yet have his heart in the right place, and Mr. Grimsteed, after some argument and careful inspection of Miss Jeffrey's post-office book, had agreed to convert the supposed engagement into fact, insisting, however, on the provision that there should be no hurry; they were both quite comfortable as they were, and it would be ridiculous to claim for themselves the hot impatience of youth. All this had been confided by Miss Jeffrey to her friend, in ignorance of the fact that party walls have ears behind them; the hostess pointed out that not a soul would ever have obtained a word of information on the subject from Mrs. Galer; they were justified in congratulating themselves on the alertness of the valuable guest, and on the fact that that lady had preserved so well at least one of her faculties.

'Expect you want to be getting off 'ome, don't you? *You*, I mean.'

The newcomer, already repenting the generosity of her autobiographical statements, replied that she had no hurry, and, unless the hostess considered her to be in the way—— The hostess seemed inclined to give a clear affirmative to this, but the

others came to her assistance with a concerted wink, and said they had stayed much longer than they had intended; they would be excused, perhaps, if they made themselves scarce. The newest arrival in Kimmer Street, having assured herself of their departure, expressed willingness to go also, and went with a parting hint that people who talked scandal were likely to get themselves into trouble. Eyes at Venetian-blinds watched the lady as she found her latchkey under the mat, and let herself in at her own house.

'I see that Mrs. Galer——' began one of the women. They had all crept back furtively in the dusk; the meeting reopened.

'Let's give the little woman a rest for once,' counselled the hostess. 'What do you think of our big friend with the comic-coloured 'ead of 'air? Nice character, isn't she, to come mixing herself up along of us?'

CHAPTER XIII

MISS JEFFREY said she considered it not quite the thing for a lady who had been engaged for some considerable time to be seen going into a public-house; what Mr. Grimsteed would say, if he knew it, did not bear contemplation. Mr. Grimsteed had no personal antipathy to refreshment, so far as he himself was concerned, but according to Miss Jeffrey, held the strictest rules of conduct for the lady to whom he had been induced to promise his hand. Mrs. Galer was kept informed in confidence, of many passages at arms between the two, wherein Miss Jeffrey appeared as a kind of bird trainer and Mr. Grimsteed an obedient canary; but the little woman, observing so far as was possible for herself, noted that, in her presence, the gentleman's tone was condescending and that of Miss Jeffrey obsequious; she guessed from this that the dressmaker had not entirely relinquished the habit of exercising the imagination.

The ladies walked up and down Farringdon Road, because Mrs. Galer admitted she felt too excited to stand still; when they passed the public-house she lingered for a moment to glance at the framed notice in the window and to sigh proudly. The

house was one that had not yet been carried away by the wave of modernity, and whilst others were pretending to be young and beautiful with plate-glass windows, globes of electric light, long walls of mirrors, a saloon that said on the door in a haughty and exclusive, 'Gentlemen Only Served in this Department,' linen ferns and paper roses, the place where the Discussion Forum held meetings presented its old discomforts, offering no seats for those who desired to rest; narrow swing-doors worked by straps showed the impress of generations of Clerkenwell shoulders. Janie Wills had greatly desired to come, but there were two arguments against this; first, want of years; second, importance of looking after Milly's baby; one might have been contested, there could be no argument against the other. Milly's baby, growing up in a neighbourhood where management of the newest arrival was confided, for the most part, to the infant older by one year, had, by reason of the close superintendence accorded to it, acquired the reputation of a pampered aristocrat.

'We've made the mistake of getting here too early.'

'Better than being too late,' said Mrs. Galer. 'Dear, dear, I wish the time would go quicker.'

'Why don't you keep calm,' urged the dressmaker, 'like I do?'

'You're not his mother! Wait till you——'

Miss Jeffrey coughed modestly. 'Only drawback about Mr. Grimsteed is,' said the dressmaker, fingering her brooch, 'that his evenings are occupied. I told

him the last time I saw him, when he was begging me to be true to him till death, that there was no reason why I shouldn't get engaged to two gentlemen. Of course it was only my fun, but I felt sorry directly the moment I said it, because he seemed so upset. He was blacked up all ready to go on, but I 'm not exaggerating, Mrs. Galer, when I say that he seemed to turn quite pale.'

'You mustn't play fast and loose with 'em.'

'I don't care,' said the dressmaker, with heavy sportiveness. 'I chaff him like anything. I like making him look confused. He says he never met any one quite so bright in conversation as I am; but, as I tell him, I 'm naturally like that. I can't help it. The other day I——'

'There goes my Sid,' cried Mrs. Galer excitedly. 'There he goes.'

'You needn't pinch my arm.'

'Silk hat and all,' said the little woman delightedly. 'Did you ever! That's his friend Mr. Bryant with him. Let's stand back in the doorway, so's they shan't see us; I 'alf promised him I wouldn't put in an appearance. There goes old Mr. Leadbetter. Begins to walk slow, don't he? Johnnie Leadbetter won't let him go out alone now. Poor Johnnie! Expect when he looks at my Sid he thinks of what *he* might have been if he'd only stuck to his lessons.'

'Lifted a heavy sewing-machine of mine the other day as though it had been a feather.'

'Oh, he's a good enough lad,' agreed Mrs. Galer, 'only that he doesn't come up to my Sid.'

'Shall we stay out here all night,' asked the dressmaker, with satire, 'or shall we go in?'

They hurried through the bar without looking at the men who rested elbows on the counter, and went up the broad staircase. Halfway a bare gas-jet flared distractedly; another on the landing, behaving with propriety, showed black-lettering on a door, 'Club Room,' and the further notice pinned there. Mrs. Galer read this twice, with open-eyed satisfaction, and would have read it again, but her companion, with a nudge, drew attention to the fact that men were coming up.

'Pah!' cried Miss Jeffrey complainingly.

The scent of yesterday's beer gave the first impression; the two sat on wooden chairs just inside the doorway, and against a wall furnished by stuffed and cased proofs of the skill of Clerkenwell anglers. At the other end of the room, on a large empty packing-case, stood a table with a corpulent bottle, two tumblers, and a wine-glass containing the kind of cigars which make a man deny that he is a smoker. Mrs. Galer, by standing up now and again, could just see Sid's head; he had parted his hair to-night in imitation of his friend Mr. Bryant. The anticipation of a crowded room was not, for the moment, realised; a few men around old Leadbetter conversed in undertones, a few disputed near Sid, but behind them a desert of empty chairs. These were taken gradually by newcomers, who entered with jovial cries such as 'Wha' cheer, everybody!' and ''Ello, 'ello, 'ello!' but becoming immediately sobered by the surroundings adopted a quieter tone.

Johnnie Leadbetter (now at the age when no suit covers wrists or ankles for more than a fleeting moment) came down the aisle between the chairs, and, taking up position as doorkeeper, saluted with his forefinger.

'Evening, ladies,' he said, with a grown-up air. 'Come to see the fun, then.' He found a cigarette. 'Seems strange to come across you, ma'am, without your sleeves rolled up.'

'You can smoke,' said the dressmaker graciously.

'I know that. Been able to ever since I can remember.'

'They say it stops the growth.'

'Don't suppose it hurts,' mentioned Mrs. Galer reassuringly. 'Only there's just this about it, Johnnie: you don't see my Sid smoke, do you?'

'Him and me are different. He can't box for nuts.'

'Won't need to. Mine isn't a greengrocery business.'

'That reminds me,' said Johnnie, stretching himself importantly, 'I've got bad news for you. I'm going to leave. Going to better myself.'

'I shall be sorry to lose you,' said Mrs. Galer genuinely; 'but I never stand in nobody's way when they have a chance of getting on in the world. It's the game I play myself.'

'Got a job in the Parcels Delivery,' said the tall lad, blowing a cloud, 'out in Goswell Road. Later, I'm going to see if I can get taken on as a policeman.'

'Pantomimes don't run for long nowadays,' remarked Miss Jeffrey.

Johnnie Leadbetter had started on a retort when a swish of skirts came to the doorway; he turned to attend to his duty. Mr. Bryant's wife came in; she gave a pleasant bow to Mrs. Galer, which made the little woman redden with gratification; with her was a well-dressed girl, who put on pince-nez as she entered, and glanced around with surprise. Mrs. Bryant looked for seats near to the two women, but the younger girl marched towards the other end of the room without any hesitation, and she was forced to follow; Mrs. Galer saw that her boy stood up and gave his chair, bending over and speaking with animation. It seemed there was nothing now to delay the opening of the debate, and old Leadbetter, stepping up on the packing-case, said, with oratorical emphasis (that gave to the words some of the importance attaching to a statement of policy by a Cabinet Minister), that he was given to understand that the waiter was in the room, and the rule of the society being that no drinks should be served whilst a member was speaking, it behoved them all to make up their minds what they wanted, and to give their orders during the brief interval that would occur between the close of his introduction and the beginning of the opener's speech. Mrs. Galer had heard her lodger speak on a previous occasion, and knew the old man's powers of eloquence; she leaned forward now, pained when he showed a difficulty in finishing a phrase (men in front of her whispered that the old tailor began to show he was getting in sight of Kensal Green), sorry for him when, with a thump on the table with

his trembling fist, he said confusedly that some thought the remedy worse than the cure, but that he hurled back the opinion in their teeth. On some of his friends attempting to sort his phrases for him, the old man took this as intimation of disagreement, and proceeded to argue with them violently, until Mrs. Galer's son in a whisper explained.

'Comrades and others,' he said, 'don't think that I'm not fully acquainted with my duties as chairman. I used to preside over meetings out on the Green long before most of you were thought of. I remember Odger saying to me once, "My lad, you've got the very firmest hand over a meeting that ever I encountered in the whole course of my life." And he was right, too. I recollect Bradlaugh, too. Bradlaugh in his prime, and before he sneaked his way into the House of Lords. Or was it the House of Commons? I can send my memory back as far as '46, and Henry Vincent and the fine men who—— All right, lad. You want to begin, I can see. I was like that when I was young. When you get to my age, you'll begin to get tired of talking, tired of putting the world straight, tired of pointing out the mistakes of other people, tired of everything. Comrades and friends, with these few remarks, I call upon the son of one who has shown more kindness to me than any one else ever did——'

Mrs Galer shook her head.

'I know what I'm talking about. Open this debate. Give your orders first.'

Miss Jeffrey reprimanded her friend afterwards

for joining in the applause, pointing out the rules of procedure she had laid down for herself when witnessing Mr. Grimsteed's performance at the Minstrels; but Mrs. Galer could not have refrained. Men came noisily up the stairs at intervals; Mrs. Galer hushed them so sternly that they entered the room almost on all-fours. She could not understand why towards the end of her boy's speech some closed their eyes, unless that in this way they were better able to appreciate the arguments and store them away in their minds. A youth in front of her began to hum to the ceiling; she gave him a sharp tap upon the shoulder, and he stopped at once. It would not have mattered greatly to the proud little mother what the matter of the speech had been, with the manner so excellent; best of it was that it exactly reproduced her opinions, served up with a fluency she could never have attained. Elderly men interrupted; her boy turned upon them with swift advice to study the subject before they attempted to contradict. Once old Leadbetter rose; Sid told him he would have an opportunity of setting out his views later. Calmer critics might have observed that the young man adopted the old debating trick of setting up, for the opposition, arguments, which could not be called strong, and thereupon knocking them down with ease and promptitude; but to his mother it seemed that he stated the case for the other side with punctilious care; at any rate he had surely disposed once for all of the old antipathies that still lingered, from mere force of habit, in Clerkenwell.

'Wish the dear old Queen was here,' she whispered to Miss Jeffrey. 'It would do her 'eart good.'

'She seldom goes out anywhere now,' remarked the dressmaker.

Peroration certainly rather long. Mrs. Galer, noticing that there still remained two more pages, looked around the room carefully. In the front row the young woman with pince-nez, chin supported by hand, listened with interest. Mrs. Galer decided to like her. Her attention proved her to be a sensible girl, able to recognise Sid's cleverness. Some of the men in the room, emptying their tumblers and placing them underneath chairs, looked over the pencilled notes which they had made in a puzzled way, rubbing their heads desperately in order to awaken memory. Mrs. Galer admitted (but only to herself) that Sid made a slight error in sitting down just before he had read the last word of his speech, finishing the last sentence from the chair; she hoped no one else observed this. The young woman facing the platform looked back over her shoulder in clapping her gloved hands, as though commanding the room to emulate her example.

'Wait a bit, wait a bit,' said old Leadbetter, craning himself to an upright position. 'One at a time if *you* please. Besides which, there's the good of the house to be thought of. Give your orders again, and then I 'll call on,' he looked down at the men who were waving pencils in air, 'I rather fancy I 'll call on friend Bingham, just for a change. Friend

Bingham, I 'm told, doesn't get a chance of saying much at home.'

The room had had no opportunity for expressing amusement during the oration of Mrs. Galer's son; it welcomed now the smallest opening. Friend Bingham, called upon after the waiter in shirt sleeves had collected a number of orders (it seemed impossible for any one man to remember them without a slate), appeared the only person not diverted by the chairman's remark, and said that he had intended, as a matter of fact, to take part in the discussion, the subject being one that interested him to a certain extent, but after what had been said he would see them further ere he contributed a single word to the debate. Might be true that he never opened his mouth in his own house, excepting at meal times, or it might not be true, but that had nothing to do with the present subject, and if the so-called chairman had dared to chip him outside, the so-called chairman's age would have been no protection. Friend Bingham threw himself back on his wooden chair with such violence that the back gave way; the waiter, re-entering at the moment with a crowded tray, carried high on an open hand, said, bitterly, that it seemed a lot of use trying to keep the home together.

Youth appeared to be content with the present form of government, and wishful for no violent change; maturity and old age inclined to blame the system for their own individual failures in life; About thirty-five made the dividing line. Look at America, said those over that age. Look at the

United States. Why, bless our souls, if we had emigrated to that far-distant country years ago what might we have been now? What would have been our position at the present time? Why, bless our souls again, in that country there would have been nothing to prevent us from rising, step by step, to the high position of President. Take Switzerland, again! There was a wonderful little country. Did the Swiss think of having a king to rule over them? Not they; got too much sense for that. And what was the result? Why simply this, that Switzerland was one of the most popular holiday resorts on the face of the map. Then, again, what about the Georges? Had our young friends read their Thackeray, and did they know what *he* thought of the whole blessed lot of them? Why, the Georges carried on in a manner that could not be described in detail before a mixed audience. And, for all we knew, the present Court might not be much better. Small use the lady at the back of the room calling out 'No, no!' to that, because mere contradiction was not argument. Nowadays facts concerning the upper classes were hushed up, and future ages (very likely) would stand aghast at the terrible revelations made to them, and wonder what the citizens of the nineteenth century were about to put up with such a state of things. Finally, and generally, wherever one looked, the system was one tottering on the very brink, and to-morrow might see the rise of a wiser and a better era.

But for the circumstances that old Leadbetter, taking notes and reserving himself for a summing

up, arranged that the sides should speak alternately little Mrs. Galer would have either taken Miss Jeffrey from the room as protest, or would have risen to utter a few short, indignant words. Made one's blood boil, she declared in a whisper to her companion, to think that men should so far forget themselves. If they could only see the portrait of the old Queen hanging up in the Victoria Laundry, they would surely think twice before they proclaimed such ridiculous opinions. But the other side had frequent opportunity, and to Mrs. Galer the arguments there seemed full of sound reason. We are invited (said the other side) to look at America. Very well. No objection whatever to doing that, providing we are not asked to live there. Why, was there ever such a country for jobbery and corruption since the world started? Talk about obtaining a berth as President of such a place; what credit was there in getting to a position where you had to pay everybody who had helped you by giving them situations? Did the Republican form of government mean that there were no class distinctions? Why, good gracious, the moment they made their bit of money, they tried to marry their daughters to English dukes. As for Switzerland, it was to be supposed that we should next be asked to model our Naval Estimates on those of that little bit of a country. Thackeray? Well, Thackeray made his name as a writer of fiction; besides which the Georges were gone and done with; you might as well cite the case of William Rufus. As regards tottering on the brink, let our opponents, having the

advantage of age, compare the strength of the movement in this country twenty or thirty years ago with the weakness of the agitation now. And that was all about it.

Windows had been opened by request of Leadbetter; the old man remarked to Sid, as he put his pipe away, that it seemed impossible to get good shag at the present time. Sid had to reply, and then Leadbetter would say a final word. The smoke in the room hurried to leave by the means of exit afforded; the ladies in the front row ceased to fan themselves; men who had spoken stood up against the walls and yawned frankly, to intimate that their interest in the proceedings was at an end. A new arrival recognised Johnnie Leadbetter, and honoured that young man with a shake of the hand.

'Ah, sergeant,' said Mrs. Galer, 'what are you going to lock us up for now?'

'Got orders to arrest you both,' replied Swanson in the same vein. Miss Jeffrey, startled, prepared to give a dramatic gesture. 'For having the cheek, the blooming cheek, if I may so term it,' said the sergeant gallantly, 'to look not a day older than years ago, when I first fell in love with you.'

Mrs. Galer laughed.

'You men,' cried Miss Jeffrey; 'I believe you think you can make us poor girls take in all you say.'

'Didn't know you were a political gentleman, sergeant.'

'Heaven forbid,' replied Swanson piously; 'I don't lower myself to that extent. I've come here for the same reason that I go everywhere—just for

the sake of having a casual look round. There's always something to see.'

'Don't always see it, do you?'

'I know what you are referring to, ma'am,' he said good-temperedly. 'Mistakes will happen, even in the G Division. A fair take in, that was. Mind you, I didn't blame this boy here for it.' He gave a jerk of the head in the direction of Johnnie Leadbetter. 'Still it's all ancient history now.'

'You never caught the one you were after.'

'*I* didn't.'

Mrs. Galer clasped her hands tightly. She began to formulate a further question, when at the other end of the room her son stood up and began to reply to the arguments. Mrs. Galer had to admit that this was not the most successful part of the evening. Piano-organs were all very well in their way, and generally, in Clerkenwell, counted for increase of cheerfulness, but this being a loud-toned instrument, and traffic in the roadway below for the time quiet, its insistent melody entered the room easily. Whilst Sid selected the weakest arguments of the other side, and said of them that they would not hold water, that they were based on a fallacy, that they betrayed ignorance, that they really went to prove *his* case, men in the room beat time with their heads to the comic song, lolled back and whistled gently to the ceiling when the organ clattered into a sentimental melody ornamented with thrills; shifted feet to the rhythm of the waltz refrain. Mrs. Galer's son, unpractised in the art of extempore speech, could not escape the

influence of the music; and when the piano-organ started a proud, definitely marked air, clearly wedded to words of aggressive patriotism, he found himself accommodating his remarks to the tune. The young woman in the front seats coughed meaningly; he sat down at once. 'Now,' said an elderly man in front of Mrs. Galer exultantly, 'now at last we shall get some sense.'

'Friends,' said Leadbetter, 'and fellow-workers.' The old man looked slowly around the room; his eye was caught by a soda-water advertisement, and he had to recall himself with an effort. 'Many of you—many of you——'

Johnnie Leadbetter moved up beside the wall in the direction of the packing-case.

'Ah, yes; yes, of course. As I was saying, many of you——'

The old man swayed, fists resting on the table. Johnnie Leadbetter ran forward and caught him as he fell.

'As though,' complained Sergeant Swanson, 'as though I hadn't got my hands full enough already.'

'It 's all right,' said Johnnie. He carried the limp, helpless old fellow down the room, easily as a nurse-maid carries a baby. 'He isn't done for yet. Fetch a four-wheeler, some one.'

'Take him home to my place, Johnnie.'

'There 's nowhere else,' said the lad, 'where they 'll have him, Mrs. Galer.'

The meeting broke up at once. A small group of the members of the Forum discussed the situation in a corner; Bingham, who had been sure it would

happen sooner or later, knew a place in Rosoman Street where, with a sixpenny whip round amongst them, they could purchase a wreath not too large, but just large enough. They were of an age when the falling out of a man from the ranks gave no surprise; sometimes they expressed astonishment at finding each other still on the march. Sid Galer and his friends came down the room, youthful excitement cooled by the incident.

'Didn't see you, mother.'

'I saw you, my boy. It was beautiful, wasn't it?' She spoke to Mrs. Bryant. 'I 'm 'urrying off to see to my poor old lodger.'

'Mother, I 'm going to see these ladies home. You can look after yourself, can't you?'

'Always 'ave done, my son.'

'Mr. Galer was in great form to-night,' remarked the girl, taking off her pince-nez and folding them with a click.

'You mean my Sid. When anybody says Mr. Galer, my mind goes right back to poor dear——'

'That will do, mother.'

Sergeant Swanson asked permission to accompany Mrs. Galer and Miss Jeffrey, and this being granted, expressed the jocular hope that his wife might get to hear of it, as likely to induce her to see that somebody appreciated his company at the proper value. Upon which Miss Jeffrey exhibited signs of alarm, and said that she did not mind, but Mr. Grimsteed had such a frightfully jealous disposition; if he should get to hear she had been observed walking with another gentleman, the sky would fall.

'I don't want to make your Othello get cross,' said the sergeant. 'You hurry off by yourself. I've got something to tell Mrs. Galer.'

'You won't think I'm silly, will you?' pleaded Miss Jeffrey as she went.

'Take a sworn affidavit to make me think that,' said Swanson. 'Mrs. Galer! A friend of mine, who's got something to do with a new hotel, is going to call on you. I think he'll give you a trial. And, talking about trials, there's that captain of yours up at a police court to-day on another charge. We may want you as a witness.'

They walked along together, because the sergeant desired news of old Leadbetter. Janie Wills, waiting at the front door, began to give the information that Swanson had called earlier in the evening, but stopped on seeing him.

'Your show looks very smart and prosperous, ma'am. Why have you left a space after the word Galer? I should put "and Co." in if I were you.'

She did not answer.

'You're very quiet all at once,' went on the sergeant. 'What you thinking of, ma'am?'

'Thinking,' she said in a low voice, 'thinking that it'll be good to see him again.'

CHAPTER XIV

THE little woman at times remarked it seemed a pity her shoulders had not grown broader with the years, but there was a touch of vanity about this, and she had trouble to conceal her delight when the girls, in the ale and bread-and-cheese time at six o'clock, reported to her some envious remark of an indolent neighbour, too lazy to arrest increasing corpulence. Shoulders broad or shoulders trim, the work and responsibility which they had to bear increased. Here, for instance, was old Leadbetter with a stroke, requiring to be waited upon hand and foot, and, instead of making a dramatic exit, likely to last in this condition, said the doctor, for goodness knew how long; life, as the doctor pointed out, was not all melodrama, and events on the real stage did not group themselves so that they might be presented between the hours of eight and eleven of an evening. The deliberate methods of the old Clerkenwell reformer gave time for his relatives to assume an appearance of great anxiety and affection; they called frequently at the Victoria Laundry, interrogating the girls when they could not get near to Mrs. Galer herself. Johnnie Leadbetter looked round after work to apologise for the persistence of the family; to them he endorsed Mrs. Galer's

assurance that no money existed—not sixpence, in fact—this but confirmed the family's hopes, and each member endeavoured to communicate with the old fellow, in order that a name might be impressed specially on his fading memory. For whether it was £5, said the family (thus suddenly aroused alike to their duties and their claims), or whether it was £500, nobody had a better right to it than his own flesh and blood. Of an evening Ballard read to him, and a shock came in finding that old Leadbetter listened to the account of preparations for the Queen's Jubilee without a word of comment.

Cares do not remain for ever, and a heavy one slipped off when Sergeant Swanson called to speak to Mrs. Galer privately over the wooden cylinders of the wringing-machine. It was like this, explained the sergeant. ('Get on with your work, girls,' said Mrs. Galer, hiding her anxiety; 'only another proposal.') It was this way. The captain, like many another man, better or worse, had, on being taken unawares, given himself away; Swanson did not care to count, on a rather warmish day, the number of occasions within his experience where this had been done. Outside Euston it happened (the captain appeared unable to resist the magnetic force of a large railway station); and on a hand being placed well around the captain's elbow, he protested indignantly, declaring that he had been in bed all night on Tuesday week, and this he could prove. Statement reported at the police station, the inspector taking the charge looked up records of events after he had filled in the form, dotting the i's

and crossing the t's; found that on the Tuesday night referred to, an adventure of some magnificence had taken place out by Alexandra Palace; a woman well known as a banjo player up and down the north of London was already in custody, having been caught by a zealous young constable, whose face now resembled a map of England. The inspector thereupon called his trusted men, and set them the task of putting two and two together; Swanson had been the first to give the correct answer, and the sergeant expressed the modest hope that it might do him a bit of good if he could get round the barrister in charge of the case, and induce him to extract a complimentary remark from the judge. But what concerned Mrs. Galer was this.

'Feel the heat of the place rather, don't you?'

'Go on,' said Mrs. Galer faintly. 'I 'm used to it.'

That the affair for which the captain had been wanted in the first place was now a bit stale; the owners of all those pieces of luggage had been recompensed by the railway, and it would be difficult in some instances to trace them; the company itself seemed not particularly keen on prosecuting because cases of the kind were looked on by the critical reader as showing want of supervision, and these young newspaper chaps——

'Mind you,' said the sergeant carefully, 'always very kind to me. *I've* no fault to find with them.'

But these youngsters, looking for something to write about, would seize upon it and compare the methods of railways abroad with railways at home, and, generally speaking, kick up a deuce of a fuss

about simply nothing at all. So that taking everything into consideration, it had been decided to say no word about the case which involved a reference to Kimmer Street, and this was the more satisfactory to the sergeant, in that he would not have to confess, in the publicity of the Sessions House, how he had come to let his man slip through his fingers.

'So you think, then,' said the sergeant, raising his voice, 'that you'd rather remain as you are, Mrs. Galer? Don't fancy you'll risk a second experiment, eh?'

'I know when I'm well off, Mr. Swanson,' she said, recovering self-possession. 'Thank you all the same for asking.'

'Might let me have the first chance if I should find myself free, and if ever you should alter your mind.'

'I'll send you a line.'

The girls working at the benches and at the skirt boards intimated that they were not deceived by all this, adding a recommendation that if the sergeant should ever want a second wife he would do well to look in some Thursday evening at the concert for the blind in Somer's Town.

'Going to decorate at all,' asked the sergeant, 'for the 26th of next month?'

'Rather,' said the little woman, accompanying him to the doorway. 'I should do something quite special, give a party or something, only there's poor old Mr. Leadbetter. I must consider him.'

'Seems to me you consider everybody excepting yourself.'

'I look after Number One, bless you,' she said confidently. 'I 'm getting quite selfish in my old age.'

'Old age,' echoed the sergeant incredulously. 'Why, what are you? Thirty-what? Whatever it is,' he added gallantly, 'you don't look it.'

They went to the street door.

'Does his case come up at the next sessions?' she asked in an undertone.

'That's so. But we shall get sentence postponed so as to give them a chance of saying where the property is. You see, he got away with it, but that wasn't the only reason why she let herself be caught instead of him. 'Pon me word, when you come to think of it, women do funny things.'

'There 's just one other matter,' she said, pressing the corner of her apron to her mouth.

'You'd scarcely recognise him. He 's clean shaved; his face is all creases, and he don't look like the same man. I had to look twice at him. Been leading a life of it since he was here with you. *Then* he looked a decent character.'

'He always behaved like one.'

'That takes a bit more doing.'

'He was the only real gentleman,' she said slowly, 'that I ever met.'

'What was it you were going to——'

'Could you tell me the name, sergeant—supposin' any one wanted to have him defended—of a good-class solicitor?'

'Now, let me think!' said the sergeant thoughtfully. 'There 's plenty of solicitors.'

'You see, Mr. Ballard might like to give a hand.'

Whatever the intentions of Ballard in this particular regard, one thing could be said: that few men in railway life had found themselves so much affected by a change from corduroy to cloth. Compelled to find some new hobby since Kent in miniature had been built over, Ballard increased his attentions to the pursuit of elementary studies at the new Polytechnic, and at home began to show recognition of the existence of books. These perplexed him at first, and he engaged upon the task of reading, gripping firmly a handful of hair, as though to keep his brain awake. Milly's baby, under careful instruction from Janie Wills, learned to do this for him, and moments of tearfulness could always be soothed by a permission to play at horses in this way with Uncle Ballard. Passages from volumes of greater depth than ordinary would be read aloud to the baby, who listened with an air of great acumen, sucking away at its comforter, and keeping perfectly still until the reading came to an end; whereupon it would plunge and kick and splutter and dribble and struggle and demand to be given back to Janie Wills, who first hugged him and then danced him into a state of exhilaration. 'Did ums get cross at hearing such a lot of horrid long words!' After a while use became custom, and Ballard found it easier to wrestle with abstruse pages with the baby on his arm, and a broad hand supporting its back; Mrs. Galer declared her belief that baby was taking it all in, and prophesied that both, if they lived long enough, would become

nearly as clever as her son. Sid had been observed conducting a party of ladies near Kimmer Street, pointing out places with the air of a Cook's guide; one or two neighbours had saluted him, but he had taken no notice, and they had thereupon withdrawn custom from the Victoria Laundry, saying that they had a right to exist just as well as any one else; they did most certainly not propose to endure being looked at as though they were not there. Mrs. Galer cared little for the loss of a client or two; her business increased every week, the new hotel had promised to recommend her, and people who left her always came back (after bitter experience with laundries which, supervision being less complete, sent home garments in a state that defied recognition), but she did speak of it to Sid, pointing out that her interest in the business was his interest, and that she wanted it to be prosperous by the time he came into it. The lad replied with a tolerant nod and a grown-up smile, but declined to be led into argument.

'It's that Bryant lot,' said Janie Wills, speaking in reference to this. 'What right have they to interfere with other people's children? By the bye, whilst I think of it. Some one called for you, Mrs. Galer, just now, when you were in your disables. Said she'd got to call at Number Sixteen, and she'd look in again.'

'Friend of Number Sixteen, eh?'

'He looks down on us,' went on Janie Wills. 'There was a time when we were quite good enough for him.'

'He wouldn't look down on his mother,' protested Ballard; 'he knows too well what he owes to her.'

'Course he wouldn't look down on his mother,' agreed Mrs. Galer. 'Surprised at you for saying such a thing, Janie Wills. What sort of a person was she?'

'He hasn't addressed half a dozen words of conversation to me for a week past.'

'That,' said Mrs. Galer reasonably, 'is because you don't speak on topics that are interesting to him. We mustn't be too 'ard on Sid. Everybody sees things from their own standpoint. It all depends which chair you 're setting in.'

'I used to like him,' said the girl, unconvinced, 'once on a time.'

'And you like him still. Run upstairs at once; that's Mr. Leadbetter rapping on the floor. You see, Mr. Ballard,' she said, after the girl had gone, 'it isn't the boy's fault. If there 's anybody to blame, it 's me.'

'Met Swanson to-day,' he remarked, putting down his book and giving a less disputable turn to the conversation.

'Yes?'

'Talking about that case. Wanted to know whether I cared to come and look in at the sessions on Wednesday. Told him I'd already got a privilege ticket to run down that day and see the new laundry I mentioned some time ago. Just for fun. 'Sides which, I don't quite like the idea.'

'You don't want to go?'

'Fond of jumping as most, but not when a man 's

down. Very glad I 'm not in it. And *you* don't want to see him again.' A pause. 'I say, *you* don't want to see him again, do you?'

'Queer thing how people come into your life and go out of it,' went on Ballard ruminatingly, after a pause. 'Who would have thought when he came here first——' He sighed. 'I don't blame any woman for trying to tumble in love with him.'

'Women don't try to tumble in love,' said Mrs. Galer, resting her hand on the table for a moment, 'as you call it. It just happens.'

'Not a subject I am specially qualified to speak about.'

'That never prevents a man from talking. Any news in the paper?'

'Great preparations going on,' he said. 'Idea is to make this one outdo the one ten years ago. You see, the old lady can't last for ever. Our directors are going to give us a day's extra pay.'

'Poor Galer was alive at the last Jubilee.'

'The boy don't take after him.' Ballard closed his book after turning down the page carefully. 'He seems to be going in quite the opposite direction. It 's worrying you, isn't it?'

'Now, Mr. Ballard,' she cried protestingly, 'have you ever in your life seen me worry about anything?'

'Don't do much at it, I admit. But I 've been turning it over in my mind, and I 've been wondering whether something can't be done. Not for his sake, you understand me, but—— Well, for yours, if you must know.'

Janie Wills, returning from upstairs, said Mr.

Leadbetter had only desired to state that he had made up his mind to take no more medicine; on being informed that the doctor had sent none, the old chap had demanded to know why medical men did not attend to their duties; he possessed as good a right to receive consideration as the Prince of Wales, and better. Soothed by exercise of argument, old Leadbetter had, in the middle of a sentence, dropped off to sleep, still talking at intervals, and repeating such phrases as 'crying scandal,' and 'no tyranny' and 'propaganda.'

'*There's* a knock! Front door, this time. Run, Janie!'

The long girl, returning, said that it was that person again who wanted to see Mrs. Galer. The person had this time managed to get her foot inside the front door (the creature from Number Sixteen watching from the other side of the roadway), refusing to leave when Janie had said there was nothing for her. Mrs. Galer put her work into the basket, and, smoothing her hair, went.

'Got to go out,' she said, returning hurriedly. 'Shan't be many minutes. Is this your black straw, Janie, or mine?'

'If it's got H.M.S. *Audacious* on it,' replied the girl, looking at her curiously, 'it's mine. If it hasn't, it ain't.'

'I'll come with you,' said Ballard. 'Been reading and thinking until I've made this blessed old head of mine ache.'

'Stay where you are, Mr. Ballard. I'll take the key in case I'm detained.'

Janie Wills, so soon as the street door had been pulled to, remarked that she did not half like the looks of the person who had called, and that every one knew the reputation of Number Sixteen; were she a man, and were her name Ballard, she would not hesitate to follow and see what happened. Janie had other arguments, but Ballard, seizing an unofficial cap, had already left the house. Mrs. Galer, at the end of the street, kept pace with the stride of a tall, burly woman; Ballard threw aside the stately leisure of a foreman porter, and ran, but he had to moderate his pace, because boys, on a keen look-out for incident, joined with him, demanding to know what was up. He kept the two in sight as far as The Angel; lost them in the maëlström of traffic, found them again in Upper Street, missed them again; returning sharply, discovered that they had taken Liverpool Road. Into a side-street, not well lighted, and with a few people at doorways and at first-floor windows, who did not seem to desire that it should be well lighted, they turned. Ballard followed, now with some of the diffidence of the man not used to meddling with affairs of others.

'What's the name of this street, kiddie?'

'What you going to give us for telling you?'

Ballard paid the sum of one penny for the information: ere the transaction concluded, Mrs. Galer and her companion had entered one of the houses. Ballard was about to denounce himself as a useless detective, when the name of the street found a place in his slow memory, and searching his

pockets, he discovered the envelope given to him by Julia Carterson. The house possessed an area, and in the basement window was a lamp; imperfect Venetian blinds achieved only a partial success in securing privacy. Ballard waited. He could see Mrs. Galer's hat; could tell there were many people in the room; perceived a banjo hanging on a nail. Two young constables went by, and Ballard spoke to them.

'Family in every room,' replied one.

'Some of 'em take in lodgers,' added the second.

'And when you put a question like that——'

'Why the answer is, ask us another.'

Ballard accepted the advice.

'What do they do for a living?' he asked.

'Anything but work,' said the young constables in duet. And went on.

Voices down in the basement room raised, women's voices all of them; Ballard listened for the growl of a man's tones. Presently a scream. Ballard went down the area steps. The door was locked and bolted; he put his shoulder through the window with a crash, and thrust aside the broken Venetians.

'Whatever possessed you?' he demanded. They walked briskly towards Liverpool Road; the crowd that had gathered on the instant sent a detachment with them, whilst the main body pressed for a glimpse of the smashed windows, listened to the infuriated shrieks of the women in the area. The two young constables at the end of the street turned and asked what the game meant; the detachment seemed to have no desire to exchange conversa-

tion with the police on any topic whatsoever, and scattered in various directions. 'Can't imagine what you were thinking of,' he went on reproachfully. ''Tisn't like you to go doing a silly idiotic thing like that. I 'm surprised at you.'

'I 'm—I 'm surprised at myself,' said Mrs. Galer, short of breath. 'Don't talk till we get out into Upper Street.'

'All right now?' he asked presently.

'Mr. Ballard!'

'Fire away.'

'If I don't thank you for what you did just now, it isn't because I don't feel grateful; it 's because I don't want to talk about it. I 'm not going to attempt to explain.'

'I see!' said Ballard. 'Only don't go putting your 'ead in the lion's den again. All very well for Daniel and people of that sort, but not you. Think how upset your Sid would be if anything 'appened.'

'You were going to suggest something about him not long ago. Only you were interrupted.'

They crossed the broad street to look at the posters outside the theatre.

'What d'you say,' asked Ballard confidentially, 'to the idea of a steam laundry—or partly steam, partly hand, a little way out, with a bit of a garden attached to it, and making the Kimmer Street place into a branch office? With Sid—this is the point or gist of my remarks—Sid to do nothing but keep the books. Told you he wanted to go into an office, didn't he now?'

'Mr. Ballard!' she cried. To look at her one

would have thought she had never met care, or trouble, or perturbing incident. 'You must have been born a genius!'

'No,' said the railway-man. 'Acquired it since. And I was also going to say that I should like to invest a trifle——'

'Rather keep the business to meself,' she said quickly. 'If you don't mind.'

CHAPTER XV

ONE of her rules of conduct, frequently declared for the benefit of the muscular, bare-armed girls in the shop, was that nothing should ever be allowed to interfere with business. If you could not talk and work at the same time, then work first and talk afterwards. Work was the principal thing in life, because it brought money, and the more money you earned the more independent you became, and the less likely to incur obligations to other people; if in this world you could not keep your chin well out, you were of little use, and you were certainly no ornament. Nevertheless, there arrived a busy day when house-agents' clerks had called and customers had come in more thirsty than usual for gossip, and two of the ironers had quarrelled seriously over their respective skirt-boards about the trimming of a hat, and an aunt of Janie Wills's had borne off that useful young woman to the waxworks in Baker Street (the aunt determined to see a new murderer in the Chamber of Horrors, come what might, but requiring company in the desperate expedition), and the baby had alarmed the entire corner by affecting to swallow a new penny presented by Ballard. (Mr. Leadbetter's doctor having been sent for, and Miss Jeffrey recalling to memory

one of the remedies for the partially drowned, the baby, with the confident smile of a successful conjuror, produced the coin from the back of its neck.)

On the busy day, when these and a variety of other incidents had happened, Johnnie Leadbetter, leaving his van, dashed into the shop, ran down below where Mrs. Galer was damping the dry things for starching, whispered a message, and on the instant the little woman had put everything aside, had dressed baby before baby had time to formulate a protest, and with an instruction to the forewoman to keep an alert ear for old Mr. Leadbetter's knock, and an open eye on all the girls, and to give her dinner-hour to the shop, was away out into Farringdon Road, breathless and hurried, but not so breathless and hurried as to forget to point out everything of interest to Milly's boy, who nodded his head sagaciously when invited to differentiate between a gee-gee and a puff-puff, as who should say: 'Think I've lived all these months without noticing that?' Across the bridge (the devious route mere artfulness) and Milly's baby received information that the gloomy, dark grey building was the place where naughty people had to go, and sometimes people who were not so very naughty, but only unlucky, as it were; the youngster's mouth began to droop at the sound of the repeated word, and Mrs. Galer hastened to assure him that she had no idea of applying it to him; he was the best little man the world had yet been privileged to see; he was going to laugh and not cry, and if he promised to be good and not give

way to melancholy he should be allowed to catch a glimpse of Australia. The baby, agreeing to this compromise, was turned upside down for a brief moment, resuming an upright position with the important air of one who has travelled far.

Near the triangular open space black lumbering police vans rested; between them and the broad steps of the Sessions House men smoked in groups; and women, also in groups, tried to induce the men to accept their challenge and engage in verbal wrestling. Some went across to the public-house at the corner, returning in a mood slightly more cheerful. Now and again an urgent message came through the swing-doors at the top of the steps, and every one bustled about with a fine show of giving assistance to the law, saying: Benson, Benson, I *ought* to know the man; where on earth has he got to; name of Benson, must be about here somewhere; pop across the way and see if he has gone in there to have half a pint; tell him he's wanted sharp. Boys came with placards of the evening papers, and every one looked at these, and read 'Murder Trial at the Sessions,' and bought the journals—not because of this announcement, but because the boys gave their word that the prints contained the two-thirty winner. Mrs. Galer, relieved to find no one of her acquaintance desiring to cross-examine, carried Milly's baby up the steps and went into the high-ceilinged entrance hall. The wooden forms under the balconies were occupied; constables of various divisions sat on ledges, helmets off, and looking quite human.

'You can't,' replied the uniformed constable steadily and definitely; 'you just can't, and that's all about it.'

'But Sergeant Swanson——'

'Place don't belong to Swanson. Besides which, I sent some one up only just now, and they sent her back again. Making me look,' said the constable aggrievedly, 'like a silly fool.'

'You don't mean that.'

''Tisn't often I give 'em the chance,' he admitted. 'They have to wake up early, mind you, to score off *me*. The wife says so too.'

'Let me see,' said Mrs. Galer diplomatically 'How many are there in the family now?'

'The one that came last November,' said the constable, with a partial change of manner, 'made four. I wanted to call him Guy Fawkes, just for a lark, but the wife said it might interfere with his prospects. Yours is a nice little kiddie.'

'Wish he *was* mine.'

'Never reckon a home is completely furnished without them,' said the constable privately. 'Sit down here and rest for a bit, and as soon as I get a chance I'll send up for Swanson. I daren't move, myself.'

Shifty-eyed young men who could not keep their gaze fixed on anything for more than a fleeting moment moved about the hall, careful to make way for any one possessing the air of authority, showing signs of pride on being beckoned by plain-clothes detectives to assist at conferences in corners, retiring from these on receiving sign of dismissal, and

exhibiting reserve on being asked by acquaintances to communicate the latest news. In the groups of women near the doorway it was easy to identify the wife of some one in trouble; friends prophesying three; tearful person fearing it could not be less than five. Milly's baby, greatly interested, twice screamed a loud interjection; Mrs. Galer diverted his attention from crime by inviting him to ride a cock-horse to Banbury Cross and see a young lady ride on a white horse, or in the alternative to consider the hard case of Humpty-Dumpty. One or two women, tired of their own grievances, spoke to her about the weariness of arm consequent on the carrying of babes; a stage took them to the question of husbands, and the ease with which men contrived to get themselves into trouble of various kinds, from street betting to manslaughter, and having quoted their own cases waited for reciprocity. Mrs. Galer intimated to them that she did not possess a husband, and that if she had possessed a husband he would not be at the Sessions in any capacity other than that of prosecutor. The ladies turned away, saying rather huffily that a decent amount of reserve they could understand, but that in this, as in everything else, it was possible to go too far.

'The idea!' laughed Mrs. Galer. Milly's baby laughed too, in order to show that it could appreciate a good joke as well as any. 'As though we had come here out of anything else but idle curiosity. What next, I wonder! People get some odd notions, don't they, baby? Why shouldn't me and you, having heard so much about the place and

read such a lot about it in the Sunday papers, just drop in and see what it's all really like? They'll be saying next that——'

'Case of——' A shout from the balcony above indicated the close of one case and the opening of another. The little woman gave a sigh of thankfulness at the respite.

'Coming up!' said the detective in charge of the case, gathering his witnesses together, and drawing them to the foot of the staircase. A bustling old usher escorted a resplendent lady down to the hall, showing her on the way the irons which, fixed against the wall, hinted to all the kind of treatment that might have been theirs had they been unlucky enough to live earlier in the century; the old usher waved aside other witnesses and with immeasurable importance lifted a finger and commanded every constable in sight to take responsibility from him and conduct the magnificent person into the office, where, behind bars, witnesses, affording time and possessing patience, might enter upon the long task of obtaining the amount of their expenses.

'Swanson says he'll be down in about two ticks. Aren't you tired of carrying that baby?'

'Takes a lot to make me tired.'

''Pon me word,' cried the constable frankly, 'if it wasn't for the look of the thing, I'd like to nurse him for a bit meself. *I* see you, saucebox! You're going to be a rare old scamp of a boy when you grow up, I can see from the twinkle in your eye. There's a seat, ma'am. Go and take it before any one else gets there. Hi!' calling to a man wearing

a grievance on his face, who was making for the vacated space. 'Just one moment, if *you* please.'

Watching the man with a grievance helped to take Mrs. Galer from her own thoughts. A person of gestures, he overplayed his part to such a preposterous extent as to be a warning to Mrs Galer, to everybody. His poor dear wife was upstairs in Court Number One, standing in a felon's dock. Oh, that he should have lived to see the day! Oh, that he should ever have been born! Oh, that such a sweet, devoted woman should find herself in a Court of law! Oh, what a wife she had been to him! Oh, what a mother she would have been to their children if there had been any! Where was justice in this England of ours; where, if it came to that, was freedom; where, when you came to think of it, was liberty? And how came it with all this undeserved trouble that his hair did not change colour, and how was it that his dear wife had been selected by Providence to suffer such ignominy? The constable passed over several of these questions, but to the last he ventured to suggest that, looking at the matter fairly and impartially, it were unfair to blame Providence; the man went on to argue the purity and sweetness of his wife's character, flourishing a handkerchief that had been white, and said that when an angel came into this world it did seem a downright shame that she should find herself charged with receiving stolen property. As for himself, he should never break bread until she came out. Through all the long years he would concentrate his attentions on the work of bewailing her

absence. He went away, and came back later to repeat all this in a more tearful voice.

'Got off?' he cried, with sudden change of manner, as Swanson came down to fetch Mrs. Galer. 'Mean to tell me she's got off? Then all I can say is then, she ought to consider herself dashed lucky. I shall go round and I shall jest tell her what I think of her and her past behaviour. Shan't mince me words neither!'

'Come along, Mrs. Galer,' said Sergeant Swanson, leading the way. 'Sorry to have kept you waiting, but you know what it is to be busy. And unless you get everything cut and'dried—— They're just up for sentence. Ever been here before?'

Mrs. Galer shook her head. 'Nor yet wanted,' she added.

Difficulty at the door until the man in charge of it on the other side appreciated the fact that it was Swanson trying to enter; the opening gave excuse for complaint. 'I have spoken more than once,' said a level voice, 'more than once about the draughts in this court, but no steps seem to be taken in the matter.' Mrs. Galer, wedged tightly in a small, compact crowd just inside the door, asked a question in a whisper, and Swanson told her this was the judge. And there was the witness-box, and that was the jury, and those were the barristers all together over there; and now Mrs. Galer would have to look after herself, for Swanson had to be in a dozen places at once. Above all—this as a final warning—she must not let the kid wake and knock up a row.

'I'm not nervous about him,' whispered Mrs. Galer.

One of the men whom Swanson had called barristers rose, and, placing a foot on the seat which he had occupied, addressed the judge in quiet, conversational tones; the crowd put hands to ears in the effort to catch the trend of his remarks. When the judge interrupted, the barrister said, 'Quite so, m'lord,' or, 'That was what I was endeavouring to convey, m'lord,' or 'Glad you lordship appreciates my argument.' Mrs. Galer understood from this that all proceeded smoothly. Members of the jury, taking holiday, leaned heads back, contemplating the ceiling, or sought temporary repose by closing one eye. From them Mrs. Galer glanced slowly around the big, square room.

'Silence!'

Those near to her frowned, and those in front looked over their shoulders with a pained, astonished air. The exclamation had been involuntary; she had forgotten that her eyes would encounter the sight of the captain in the dock by the side of the banjo woman. He stood there, looking straight before him, passing his hand now and again over his smooth hair, smiling as though he were the only one in court who detected humour in the remarks of counsel. Looking older, certainly, with two deep lines coming down to the corners of his mouth, and two star-like creases near to each eye; there was still a very marked contrast between him and his companion. She had increased her manner of defiance, and, leaning elbows on the wooden front of the dock, declined to accept the warder's advice

concerning the true etiquette of the situation. She looked around and nodded to some friends; Mrs. Galer also recognised them. The women caught Mrs. Galer's eye, and scowled at her.

'It's all right, my pet,' whispered Mrs. Galer to the sleeping baby. 'I wasn't afraid of them that night in Islington, and I'm not afraid of them now. I wasn't going to persuade him to take all the blame just to save her, and to please a lot of characters like that.'

Counsel was doing his best to justify the excellent fee marked on his brief. His client, a man of good breeding, had been so unfortunate as to allow himself to mix with those far below him in social standing. He had already been detained for some time, and the punishment he had undergone was, counsel suggested, sufficient to meet the case. Fact that he had given no information concerning the whereabouts of the property could only mean that the information was not in his possession. There were friends, or, to speak more precisely, there was *a* friend, willing to provide money for him to go abroad, and if his lordship could see his way to taking a lenient view, this man who stood in the dock could begin in a far-off land a new life, contributing further to the greatness of an empire, in regard to which it had been truly said—— And so on, and so on.

'He'll get off, my sweet. He'll get off, and you and me will see about something special for supper directly the moment we get out of this stuffy place.'

Sergeant Swanson up in the witness-box. Swan-

son, with a note-book in front of him and prepared to give facts. Not argument, not oratory, but just facts. Friends of the banjo woman nod heads contentedly as the captain — now disclosed as no captain, but admittedly of a respectable family and with relatives who desired to have nothing more to do with him—as the captain ceases to smile, and wilts, and crumples in the dock. Swanson adds to the deadly force of the record by scrupulous fairness, relating that in one case, some years ago, the male prisoner was, he finds, of service in communicating information to the police. As to the female prisoner, this was *her* record.

'Thank goodness he's finished, my precious. They've said the worst they can, and it's pretty bad. But it doesn't affect what me and you think of him, does it, dearie? Ought to, I s'pose, but somehow it doesn't!'

Milly's baby, not yet old enough to be interested in crime, sleeps through it all, half opening an eye now and again, but, deciding that a man's rest means everything, closes the eye again, and doses peacefully as though he were in his own cot beside the bed of Mrs. Galer and Janie Wills. The captain has fear in his gaze now; he wipes his forehead with the palm of his hand. The judge begins to speak, and Mrs. Galer can endure it no longer.

Outside the door Milly's baby gives a yawn, and Mrs. Galer steadies his little knob of a chin carefully. Opening his eyes widely, Milly's baby is half inclined to proclaim, in the usual way, his return to the waking world and a fierce complaint that

no bottle is ready, but Mrs. Galer soothes him. The door opens. The heated crowd comes out chattering.

'Satisfied?'

'With what?' asks Mrs. Galer.

'Didn't do her much harm, after all,' explain the women exultantly, 'mighty clever as you thought you were. She's got it soft.'

'And he?'

'He's got it heavy.'

The blessed sunlight and the sky above, honest men and women about, tram-cars sailing along smoothly, and children playing on the triangular space.

'Tell you the one advantage about it, baby,' says Mrs. Galer, in rather an unsteady voice, on the way home, 'we shan't have to bother now about getting anything in special for supper.'

CHAPTER XVI

WOMEN in Kimmer Street, who, fortunate enough not to have to work to keep their husbands, and engaged principally in reducing the amount of domestic work to a minimum, said of themselves as they prepared for an afternoon's gossip, that upon their word, what with this and with that, they seemed never to have a moment they could call their own; they sometimes added a regret that they had not been born with two pairs of hands. Mrs. Galer, for her part, went through the days and the months and the seasons and the years without a grumble (the reproofs addressed to her girls were but stereotyped, and an absence of these would have given perturbation), welcoming calmly additions to her daily work much as a bus-conductor in accepting a new passenger bids the others to crowd more closely. Kimmer Street resented this, and whilst giving her a forced smile of neighbourliness, did not hesitate to express real opinions when she was out of hearing. Any woman with a ha'porth of commonsense would have bundled old Leadbetter back to his relatives, or into the workhouse infirmary; an elderly man, who, having had a stroke, had the tactlessness to linger on as though there were some chance of getting better, deserved no consideration.

The old fellow's relatives had tired of showing attention to him, and at a friendly meeting had decided to escape these exacting duties and pool their interests. 'The sooner he goes,' said a lady of the family noted for her humour, 'the sooner he goes the quicker.' Meanwhile, if Mrs. Galer cared to keep him and look after him, and, just because he had been a paying lodger for some years, was willing now to let him get months and months behindhand with his rent, why, let her do so; the same lady of the Leadbetter family had an apt quotation concerning fools that seemed to fit the case admirably. Then, again, although she might well be proud of the recent success of her boy, and content with the progress of the laundry, any ordinary sensible woman would have made the borough resound with her grievance concerning Ballard; in Clerkenwell a good lodger being esteemed as on a very high level indeed in that he helped to pay the rent and in certain instances (Ballard a case in point) was clever enough to nurse the baby; in return the best rasher of bacon, the soft-roed herring, were for the lodger, and for him the easiest chair.

Here was Ballard (on whom landladies of the district had squandered many a matronly smile in the hope of securing him when he decided to change quarters) home one evening in the late autumn with a memorandum from his superintendent, directing him to transfer himself immediately from King's Cross and London to a junction miles away in the country, where he would be invested with the title of inspector, and furnished with a uniform that a

duke might be proud to wear. Wages thirty shillings a week, a rank that almost amounted to knighthood (he would be called 'sir' by every man wearing corduroy); first-class passengers would shake hands with him, and give him their views about Mr. Gladstone's successor. The news being communicated in baby language to Milly's youngster, and after a while understood, that youth screamed and kicked, and with doubled fists beat the air, as though wishful of defying the intervention of the authorities; subterfuge had to be resorted to, and the assurance given that Uncle Ballard was only going away for a ride on a puff-puff; that he would soon be back, that the main reason for the journey was the buying of something rare and precious in the shape of chocolate; Janie Wills added a promise, on her word of honour, that baby should be taken to the window of the front room frequently to watch for the return; and baby cheered up, pulled everybody's hair as hard as he could, and congratulated himself secretly on the advantages of taking up a definite attitude. When a Great Northern van called for Ballard's effects, baby, like many another diplomatist, found himself again deluded, this time by the exact truth, which he received derisively.

'We *shall* miss you, Mr. Ballard.'

'Needn't miss me for long,' he said shortly.

'Think you 'll be coming back soon?'

'Doesn't depend on me.'

'At any rate,' said Mrs. Galer, 'try not to forget us.'

'That won't need any particular effort on my part. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Mr. Ballard. Go' bless you,' rubbing her hands dry.

'I 'd rather,' said Ballard, taking off his cap rather clumsily, 'I 'd a jolly sight rather He 'd look after you.'

'*I* shall be all right,' said Mrs. Galer.

Kimmer Street, remarking contentedly that the time would be long ere the little woman found another lodger who came up to the high standard created by Ballard, watched for the card to reappear in the window. As days went by and weeks and no inquiry appeared there for a 'Respectable Single Man,' Kimmer Street became hysterical, and Number Thirty-Eight, calling for her parcel one Saturday night, managed to gain audience of Mrs. Galer, and offered in the friendliest manner the loan of her own card, slightly be-thumbed by frequent use, but still competent to make its meaning understood; she received the astonishing news that Mrs. Galer did not propose to let again. It was past one o'clock that night before Number Thirty-Eight had completed the task of imparting this information to all whom it did not concern.

Mrs. Galer had been more than usually correct in prophesying that all would miss the presence of Ballard. Milly's boy called aloud for him continually, demanding not only his friend, but the picture-papers which had hitherto come from King's Cross Station with stirring scenes of warfare; baby had learnt to single out General Kitchener with an acumen that would have flattered the artists. The old invalid upstairs missed an audience, never

perhaps so contentious as he could have wished, and inclined to take non-committal views, expressed by such phrases as, 'May be something in what you say, and then again, there may not!' or 'I s'pose if we was him we should do much the same!' or, 'What you've got to take into account in these matters is the circumstances!' but still an audience, and always ready to hear again the account of that great and glorious day in July of '66, when the railings of Hyde Park sustained injury; the French Revolution seemed but a futile outbreak compared with this. Mrs. Galer herself would have deplored his absence the more but for the occasional letters from her boy Sid at the fresh schools and the work occasioned by the new steam laundry. There is a leisureliness about the methods of the London builder and his men which has at previous times given occasion for remark. During that winter Mrs. Galer, as she came away from the new premises, said to the foreman that she wished she had been born a bricklayer, to which the foreman, with equal regularity, answered with an appeal to her to remember the case of Rome.

Sometimes Janie Wills, taller than ever, and acquiring by practice a slightly bored smile, which, worn in public on Sunday afternoons, goaded girl friends to the point of frenzy—Janie Wills would accompany her, and the two would explain what they thought of the workmen, what they thought of the builder (who had struck out the penalising clause in the contract on the grounds that his word was as good as his bond), what they thought of

everybody—and the battle of words over, the men admitted privately to each other that rather than have much to do with a woman in the way of business they would seek rest by making a hole in the waters of the River Lea. To Janie, and to Janie only, Mrs. Galer confided information of a financial nature, and the girl repaid her by presenting, when girls of the laundry and others approached her with specious inquiries on the point, a dense wall of ignorance; lady customers said of Janie with great bitterness that either she was a born idiot, or else an impudent hussy. Mrs. Galer knew, and Janie knew, that some of the money had been advanced by a reasonable building society that differed from some of its kind. Mrs. Galer felt confident of being able to repay the amount before Sid reached twenty-one; he would come into partnership (as she pointed out to Janie) so soon as ever he liked, bringing for his share intelligence, education, youth, a combination such as had rarely been offered to a business of the kind.

'Think he's got enough common-sense?' asked Janie doubtfully.

'I've got enough of that for two,' said Mrs. Galer.

The establishment out Willesden way which she had taken for model was managed by two men, brothers, but not one of these had the handwriting of her Sid, neither could put a letter together so well as he. Sid's communications came with most excellent regularity: nearly all of them contained the same information, but served up so dexterously as to have the appearance of an entirely new dish.

They came on an evening by the half-past nine post, when the steam and damp of the earlier days of the week had given the place to warm, cosy scent of ironing, the girls with their right arms bared almost to the shoulders, and showing a muscle that had made many a young man of Clerkenwell think twice before suggesting the preliminary stage of courtship known as 'taking a bit of a stroll round together'; the strings under the ceiling crowded with garments of blameless white; children in search of entertainment (not to be found, mind you, in Clerkenwell without taking of thought and trouble) watching outside until the approach of a piano-organ with its entrancing and elaborate trills preluding an air to which dance could be accommodated; the instrumentalists knew that if they gave some minutes of enjoyment to the youngsters outside the Victoria Laundry Mrs. Galer was good for twopence, and on Friday night as much as threepence. For this was the night when the postman came into the shop, and instead of slapping the business letters and circulars down in front of Milly's successor, asking why she did not get married and escaping without giving time for reply, he took the delivery to Mrs. Galer herself, with respectful information about the weather. The girls stopped talking whilst the little woman read; Janie Wills came through the passage from the house and waited.

'Keeping fit,' Mrs. Galer would announce delightedly. 'Working 'ard! Hopes I 'm well. They 're having wonderful weather, considering the time of year. Bryants have been to see him. Would

like me to come, but begs me not to, because of the railway journey. Fears it would knock me up. Has met some very clever young men. All well connected. One has asked him 'ome for the 'olidays. But he's promised to go to the Bryants.'

'Thought he was coming 'ere, Mrs. Galer,' remarked the head girl.

'You shouldn't think; makes you look old. Let me see, now, where was I?'

'You certainly said you expected him home this time. I heard you say so; we all heard you say so.'

'I may perhaps have made some remark in the course of casual conversation to that effect, but if so, I didn't know what I was saying. Never dreamt for a moment that he'd come 'ome 'ere for his 'olidays. Clerkenwell isn't a seaside resort, is it? Clerkenwell isn't a place up the river, is it? Clerkenwell isn't in the Lake district, is it? Very well, then, have some sense about you, do. I want to see him again, of course—that stands to reason; I want to see if he's grown, and——. Now do, for goodness gracious sake, get on with your ironing, or else,' laughing and rubbing her eyes with the corner of her apron, 'or else I shall give every blessed one of you the sack. I shall reelly! You may giggle, but I don't speak twice, mind you. Now, let me see what's on the last page. Oh! kind regards to you, Janie.'

'He can keep them,' said Miss Wills.

'And he says you are to address his envelopes in future. There's an honour.'

'I can tell why that is. He wants the other

half-baked young men to think some girl is fond of him.'

'Hopes I 'm not overworking meself, and that I am keeping well. There,' kissing it, 'there 's a dear nice letter to have from one's own boy. And now let 's see about work again.'

He looked in one afternoon during the vacation, when the girls were having their three o'clock cups of tea, staying for a few minutes only; the principal impressions left upon his mother were that he would some day have a fair moustache, and that henceforward she had to accustom herself to calling him Sidney. She protested, but it was evidently a subject on which he had made up his mind completely, and it gave her some perturbation until, on discussing the matter with Janie Wills, that young woman's bitter comments made her search for excuses, and she discovered that the new name was more like the one which she had used in his early childhood's days than the monosyllable of intermediate times. Janie Wills told the baby exactly what she thought of it all, and the baby nodded his white befrilled hat, offering to give, as an agreeable diversion, his well-known imitation of a prowling tiger.

Janie Wills might have resented the increasing aloofness of Mrs. Galer's son the more but for an encounter that, although she professed to look upon it as a casual incident, nevertheless gave her a fine feeling of assurance. Victoria Park would be a long way from Kimmer Street were it not for the assistance given by tramcars; these you take from

Clerkenwell Road, and payment of twopence franks you to Cambridge-heath Station, whence it is but a step to the gates. On an early spring afternoon, so bright and so full of sunshine, that the day might well have been proclaimed a public holiday, Mrs. Galer said that Janie Wills might take the necessary coppers from underneath the brass candlestick in the kitchen, and, for the purpose of bringing back the roses to her cheeks, convey baby by tramcar eastwards. A lady customer, with a Devonshire accent, had been in the shop that morning, and her disparagement of town had induced Mrs. Galer to admit (after arguing the case for the defence with warmth and ability) that for two pins she would take baby and run down and see how Uncle Ballard was getting on; he wrote sometimes on an official memorandum, singing himself her obedt. servant, and never failing to add an invitation.

Janie Wills was inside the gates of the park, trying to persuade the baby (now becoming a talkative person, but not always intelligible) that it was unmanly to expect to be carried, and pointing out the considerable advantages of pedestrian exercise, when a large hand pinched her ear. She turned, hot-faced, and protested.

'Beg pardon,' replied the youth. 'Didn't know it was a lady. Thought it was young Janie Wills.'

'Same thing,' she retorted. 'Whatever you been and done to your face?'

'Closed just at present. For alterations and repairs.'

'Time you thought about making some improve-

ment. Been on the tip of my tongue to suggest it to you more than once.'

'Yours,' said Johnny Leadbettter gruffly, 'is not the kind of face that any one would care to dwell on.'

'Come on, baby. Let the pretty gentleman get on with his duties.'

'What duties?'

'Aren't you here to frighten the birds away?'

'I 'm disappointed in you,' he said; 'you ain't the girl I took you for. I always looked upon you as having a sympathetic 'eart beneath a somewhat forbidding exterior. Find I 'm wrong. It 'll be a warning to me. When I remember,' went on the bandaged youth aggrievedly, 'that strangers, people I 've never seen before, have met me in the street and stopped to ask for particulars of my accident—— Well, it 's rough! That 's what it is, rough!'

'Why, I 've been asking you forty thousand times,' declared the girl; 'and you haven't given me a satisfactory answer.'

They sat down near to the lake, across which boats went jerkily at the bidding of amateur oarsmen; children paddled and young anglers threw a line with the air of men who hope to take home a fourteen-pound salmon. The trees gave but little shade, and young women who had brought books, bearing the Free Library label, gave up all pretence of study and used them as fans. Infants, in home-made mail-carts that advertised Somebody's Starch, were left whilst child nurses talked together gravely on the difficulties of bringing up a family; the

infants took advantage of the opportunity to crown each other with gravel. Johnnie Leadbetter, still suffering from a sense of injury, declined now to give the information until Miss Wills, tired of asking, announced that she did not care whether he told her or not; whereupon he explained the nature of the accident, saving self-respect by addressing his conversation to the baby, who listened open-mouthed, looking from one to the other as each finished a sentence.

'That was how it 'appened, my lad,' said Johnnie Leadbetter, 'and I 've been in the Royal Free and not a soul has come near me all the time. Not a female soul, that is. Some of my chums called as a matter of course, but I don't count them. And yet they say that when pain and anguish wring the brow——' He laughed at the blue sky ironically.

'Ask him,' begged the girl wildly, 'ask him how anybody is to guess that things like this have occurred if nobody comes and says so? Put the question to him, baby, and see whether he 's got an answer to it. Does he think that me and Mrs. Galer have got so little to do that we can go about asking people if they know what 's become of Mr. J. E. Leadbetter, of 52 Meredith Street, E.C. Haven't we got our hands full enough as it is with the new place, and looking out for machines, without that? Bah!' said Janie Wills, turning her head away. 'Tell him, baby, that we haven't the patience to talk to him.'

'I didn't expect any attention from relatives, because they 're an odd lot. But I did expect a

little something more from so-called friends. It's like this, baby. S'posin' I'd been wiped out altogether! S'posin' by this time I'd been wearing a wooden suit, and I'd been put away in the cemetery, with daisies growing above my grave! S'posin' there'd been no one to follow me, and s'posin'—I've been and come out without one,' said Johnnie, touched acutely by his own eloquence. 'Ask her if she's got hers about her, baby.'

'Clean to-day,' murmured Janie Wills, first dabbing at her eyes with the handkerchief, and then handing it over. The baby looked at both with astonishment, and managed by words to intimate that, in a contest of tears, he felt well prepared to enter. 'Give it back to me,' she sobbed, 'when you've done with it. Oh, dear, oh, dear, you men do take a delight in making anybody feel miserable!'

'She ain't answered my question yet, baby,' remarked Johnnie Leadbetter, when he had recovered self-possession. 'What I want to know is, what she thought had become of me all this time. That's what I want to get at.'

'P'r'aps she never gave you a thought at all.'

'That's one answer,' he admitted. 'But s'posin' she did give me a thought, what then?'

'P'r'aps she thought you were flirting with some other girl.'

He rose and stamped his way round to the boat-shed, and then stamped his way back.

'Well,' with another roar that made the juvenile anglers glance at him reproachfully, 'if that isn't the best bit I ever come across in all my blessed life.

Me, flirting! Oh my, oh lor'! I shall ache after this as if I 'd been out to a party.'

'Whimpering one minute, giggling the next,' she said contemptuously, 'people must think he is off that silly old bandaged head of his. Come on, baby, let you and me get along. We came here for our health; not to witness an exhibition.'

The baby, anxious to see it out, announced noisily and wrathfully disinclination to leave until the curtain should come down on the performance. Johnnie asked him whether he would care for a life on the ocean wave, or, in other words, a turn round the lake in a boat, and on baby conveying lively agreement with this suggestion Miss Wills asked him to inquire of the gentleman whether he could swim; the gentleman replied haughtily that under his management there would be no opportunity for putting such powers to the test. At the landing-stage he selected a boat with much caution; the man in charge had his opportunity later when he mentioned that the best authorities recommended the pulling of both sculls together. Partly by luck and partly by accident, they found themselves half-way round the lake, and Janie, challenged definitely, admitted she was enjoying herself.

'Wish Mrs. Galer was here,' she added.

'We don't want a crowd,' remarked the lad, shipping the sculls with some trouble.

'That's right,' said Janie. 'Knock our two heads about and then we shall all look alike.'

'Never takes a holiday, does she?'

'Says that when she feels she wants a change, she

just works a bit harder than usual. And if ever she gets a bit humpish, and that's very rare mind you, you've only to mention Sid's name, or, rather, Sidney, as we have to call him now——'

'You'll find him altered when he comes home.'

'Hope so,' said Janie Wills indifferently.

'Like that, is it?' he remarked with interest. 'All the same, he's a clever chap to have gained that twenty pound intermediate scholarship a few months ago.'

'Cleverness isn't everything,' said Janie.

Johnnie Leadbetter seemed more cheerful after this, and talked of his own prospects. Still growing, he said, and unless some dire misfortune arrested his progress, reason to hope that he would be able, so soon as age permitted, to enter the force. He looked for satire on making this announcement, but Janie said, with sedateness, that there were many worse occupations for a young man; the necessity of showing an example of regular behaviour to others could not fail to have some effect on one's own character. Some girls liked soldiers, some liked sailors; her objection to these was that they were here to-day and gone to-morrow. Johnnie asked how the idea of tea struck her, and she said that the only argument against tea was the expense; Johnnie replied with a gay colloquialism, and tea they had, with baby, now giving signs of the approach of the dustman, drinking sleepily a glass of milk and smearing his face with a sugared bun. On some girls seated at a round table near showing signs of amusement at Johnnie's bandaged head, Janie made

a few pointed comments on *their* appearance, worsting them in about three rounds. Johnnie would not hear of Miss Wills settling her share of the bill, and going home with her and the baby on the top of a tramcar, paid the conductor.

'I think,' said the girl that night to Mrs. Galer, 'there must be something very soothing and agreeable about being engaged.'

'Depends on the man, my dear.'

'But in any case,' she urged dreamily, 'seems to me it must be a great save.'

Mrs. Galer, an observant woman, and with much demanding her attention, noticed that she did not again have to remind Janie Wills of the necessity of keeping her head well back.

CHAPTER XVII

BALLARD, when he paid shy visits to town that winter, never failed to reinforce written invitations by mentioning to Mrs. Galer that a cup of tea waited for her down in the country, and she always countered with a reminder of the necessity of keeping watchful eyes on the fitting-up of the new steam laundry. Ballard took pains to tell everybody that he came to Kimmer Street only to see how his old chum Mr. Leadbetter was progressing; it was clearly not his fault that the deliberate old invalid refused to touch the fruit or look at the chrysanthemums, which, in consequence, had to find their way downstairs; the inspector brought rabbits and hares as presents for Milly's baby, and these also went to the kitchen, so that on pie nights the pavement outside became occupied by children exercising the sense of smell. Ballard reported himself still well satisfied with his new berth; station-master friendly, and not disposed to interfere in the outdoor work; men willing and orderly, although rather too much on the make; Ballard had developed new ideas on the important question of tips. All the same, he told Mrs. Galer and Janie and the baby, that he had formed a decision on one particular point; he hinted that he awaited their approval with some anxiety. Point

was this: In the old King's Cross days his view had been that if in this world you were to get promotion, promotion would come to you; his new argument was the exact opposite, being, indeed, that what you failed to ask for you seldom obtained, and that the correct method was to let the authorities know you were not only alive, but kicking. Thus, he explained, whenever there occurred a vacancy, he simply took a memorandum and a pen and a dip of ink, and sat down and wrote in for it. 'I do believe,' said Inspector Ballard amusedly, 'that if Salisbury was to resign I should have a go for his place.' The baby said a few words of approval, and Janie nodded, and on Mrs. Galer refraining from pointing out that he was now acting on advice which she had given to him long ago, Ballard slapped the table and said, with the determination of those who take a decisive course tardily, that he had jolly well made up his mind, and no power on this earth could jolly well make him alter it.

Result of this new energy arrived later. A railway guard came hurriedly down Kimmer Street one spring morning carrying shining black hand-bag, green flag (furled), lamp in hand, bunch of primroses, and brave with uniform; before the ladies of the street had had time to give their eyes rare entertainment, he was at the Victoria Laundry (now converting itself into an office), and whilst they smoothed their hair for his return, he was out again and away down the street borrowing the methods of his own express trains. In the shop, where carpenters sawed and whistled and hammered, and the

girls, cheered by male companionship, shouted repartees at the top note of their voices, acceleration of movement. Important message, written on telegram form for better appearance of urgency, begging Mrs. Galer to catch train just after midday to small station, name given above by india-rubber stamp, there to go over station apartments and favour Ballard with valuable advice. 'Excuse hurry and red ink; last man got wrong in his accounts, self only just appointed. Your obedt. servant, T. A. Ballard.'

'Well,' said Janie Wills excitedly, 'you've got to make up your mind.'

'I've done that,' replied the little woman, pinching her under-lip thoughtfully. 'The only thing is, shall I go alone?'

'I've never really been in what you may call the very heart of the country. Unless Child's Hill——'

'I'll pop in and see Miss Jeffrey.'

'Right you are,' said the girl agreeably. 'So long as you take a bit of a holiday, it don't matter who goes with you. Long time since you had that day out on Hampstead Heath.'

'I remember the day you mean,' said Mrs. Galer.

Miss Jeffrey said she did not suppose for a moment that she would enjoy herself, but she agreed to make the experiment, and putting aside work, begged the lady upstairs to tell Mr. Grimsteed if he called, that he must do without her company for one day of his life; the message to customers requiring to be fitted was that she had

been called away to attend a titled person in the West End. Mention of Ballard's name at King's Cross obtained for them corner seats; the official remarked to them on the advantages of being born lucky as compared with the advantages of being born rich, and encouraged by absence of contradiction went further, saying that liking a country station as well as any, he did not feel prepared to cultivate a habit of being always on the fawn, thereupon receiving a reply from Mrs. Galer that made him close the carriage-door quickly; standing back, he dabbed at the inside of his cap in a pained, thoughtful way.

At the destination (name marked out on a bank in giant capitals of white-washed stones, and the broad platform a flower-garden) stood Ballard with a new air of importance, his boots at the top note of brilliancy. He came forward, giving the salute generally reserved for season-ticket-holders and directors.

'Welcome!' he said. He assisted Mrs. Galer to alight, and permitted Miss Jeffrey to step down without help. 'Welcome to our baronial hall. 'Scuse me one minute.' He looked at his watch, compared it with the station clock, and nodded to the guard; the train started. Mrs. Galer noticed that the rear guard, in leaning out to exchange signals with his colleague, winked at Ballard's short office-boy; she resolved to wear a cloak of reserve. 'Well,' said Ballard heartily, 'even a blind man might be glad to see you. How 've you been?'

'Where do we give up tickets?' asked Miss Jeffrey.

'Don't you trouble your head about tickets,' said Ballard. 'But if you want to give them up—here, Applebee!' The short office-boy came forward.

'You're a nice little lad,' said Mrs. Galer pleasantly.

'No, I en't,' said the office-boy, 'I'm a nice young man.'

'How long have you lived here?'

'Since I was born.'

'Ever been to London?'

'Not me,' said the office-boy knowingly.

The little woman, astonished to find this contempt for the metropolis, forgot to be anything but her bright self; compensation furnished by Miss Jeffrey, who, meaning to assume a refined manner, took instead the attitude of one deeply offended. In the booking-office the lad mentioned to his station-master that his mother had promised to have hot potato-pie ready at that precise hour, and that what he thought of doing was to cut away home and have a tuck in at it before an older brother had time to eat it all. Ballard said he would endeavour to conduct the affairs of the Great Northern for the space of one hour without the boy's aid. The ladies accepted the offer of Windsor chairs, and sat down, giving Ballard permission to write what he called two rather important communications to King's Cross; and this he did with only one reference to the pocket dictionary which stood on the desk, whilst the visitors looked around with wonder at the dating machine, with awe at the parti-coloured ticket case and the large abstract book. Ballard gave a sigh of

relief as he turned; Mrs. Galer declared that she meant to see what the urgent communications were about, expressing a belief that they were love letters, and going to the desk read them aloud.

'Sir,—In reply to your C.B. 1006 of the 10th inst., I beg to inform you that nothing is known of the matter at this station.'

'Dear Sir,—In reply to yours, quoted above, I have questioned the whole of my staff, and nothing is known of the matter at this station.'

'Best way to answer them,' said Ballard, excusingly. 'Great secret of railway life is not to know too much. A man who's got too good a memory is pretty well sure to find himself in trouble, sooner or later, at headquarters. Of course there's a limit. My predecessor, for instance'—Ballard lingered over the word, giving all its syllables—'my predecessor, he got into hot water, which his doctor hadn't ordered him, through not remembering which was the office cash and which was his own.'

'I haven't any patience with men,' said Miss Jeffrey.

'You'll have to, dear, when you get married.'

'That happy event hasn't come off then yet?' remarked Ballard inquiringly. 'Time's getting on. We don't none of us get any younger.'

'What about you, Mr. Ballard?' asked Mrs. Galer, interposing on her friend's behalf. He looked at her a few moments before replying.

'Going to talk to you about that presently,' he said.

'I for one,' cried the dressmaker haughtily, 'should

think twice before I agreed to come and settle down in a 'eaven-forsaken, right-off-the-map, silly, ridiculous place like this.'

'To tell you the truth,' said Ballard, 'I hadn't thought of asking you to do so.'

A bell announced the coming of an up-train, and Mrs. Galer begged she might be allowed to issue the tickets; on her friend urging her to be careful and pointing out that for all they knew there might be general managers about, Ballard said that the request should certainly be granted. The wooden window opened, it appeared at first that the village did not intend to patronise the arriving train, but Ballard on the look-out through a scraped circle in the frosted panes announced that an old girl was coming up the lane, waving an umbrella, and Mrs. Galer stood on the first rungs of a stool, with the station-master at her elbow; Miss Jeffrey said crossly she had never seen such tomfoolery in the whole course of her existence. The amateur would doubtless have done her work well, only that the train and the old girl arriving together, the passenger was so flustered that an objective had to be suggested. Mrs. Galer, after the up-train had gone, asked whether he often encountered cases of the kind, and Ballard replied that all railway passengers were like this, more or less; most of them, it seemed to him, required the company of a nurse. Miss Jeffrey declined to be made acquainted with the mysteries of the telegraph on the grounds that she had once, thanks to Mr. Grimsteed's generosity, received a shock from a somewhat similar instrument that

would never fade from her memory, but Mrs. Galer watched whilst Ballard sent a message to a friend at a station some twenty miles away, asking how the colleague's wife was progressing. Ballard found himself unable to repeat the exact words of the reply received, and Mrs. Galer said the worst of all these toys seemed to be they were so liable to get out of order. The office-boy came back with a look of repletion on his round face.

'Now then!' announced Ballard. 'Who says a bit of lunch?'

'I was beginning to wonder,' remarked Miss Jeffrey.

A door marked 'Private' led from the platform to the apartments reserved for the station-master, and at the top of staircase stood a thin, flat woman, who eyed the visitors from town carefully, shaking hands on being introduced as 'housekeeper to my predecessor,' much in the way of a boxer before the first round. Ballard explained that his predecessor counted, amongst other misfortunes, that of being a bachelor like himself, and it soon became evident the lady looked upon her situation as permanent, and felt disinclined to run any risks of being ousted from it.

To the little woman she showed great attention, conducting her through the corridor which ran the length of the apartments, and pointing out its narrowness, asserting that some people would have to go through it sideways; remarking with contempt on the pattern of the wall-paper in the bedrooms, deriding the shape of the sitting-room, the

chimney which, she declared, had smoked ever since she had first made its acquaintance; in the kitchen the housekeeper could scarce find words to express her low opinion of the general arrangements. On Mrs. Galer mentioning that it was surely an advantage to have coals provided free of charge, the housekeeper retorted that she could not imagine any one having the cheek to charge for them under any circumstances whatsoever. Mrs. Galer said that at any rate the housekeeper looked wonderfully well, and the housekeeper thereupon declared she had not known what it was to have a day's perfect health since first she stepped foot into the place; the blame for this she shared between dampness and drains.

'We needn't bother about grace,' said Ballard, seated at the top of the table, on their return. 'Miss Jeffrey, are you partial to the scrump, or do you like it the least bit underdone? Come now,' on the dressmaker replying, with a reticent shake of the head, that she had no preference, 'do cheer up for once in your life. Put your young man out of your head and think of something pleasant.'

'All very well for you to talk, Mr. Ballard,' said Mrs. Galer; 'you don't know what it is to be in love. Ah! You'll cut yourself if you aren't careful.'

'Miss Jeffrey, if that isn't exactly what you want, don't be afraid to say so.'

'I'll make it do,' said the dressmaker resignedly.

The housekeeper had put forth her best and brightest efforts in cooking, and the meal wound up

in good style with an apple-pie and custard; the housekeeper called in to receive compliments, modestly attributed the happy skill to heredity. Ballard noticed that she contrived to work into these acknowledgments a libellous reference to the grate, and decided to show Mrs. Galer through the rooms again; and, whilst the housekeeper and Miss Jeffrey discussed, with acrimony, the question of low-necked dresses as worn at her Majesty's Drawing Rooms, he conducted the little woman through the suite of apartments, pointing out that one soon became reconciled to the noise of shunting of goods trains at nights, looking upon it after a while as a lullaby, and feeling the absence of it acutely on Saturday evenings. White roses grew in the summer round the windows, and there was a passion-flower just down below, to which even district superintendents had been known to give a word of approval.

'But isn't it rather—what shall I say—monotonous, Mr. Ballard?'

Ballard became quite fluent in contending against this view. Look at the garden stretching right away there! Look at the way things grew! Why, you could see a difference every day; if one thing went off another came on immediately to take its place. And as regards society, there was the grocer, as gentlemanly a chap as any one could wish to meet, and a regular marvel at collecting postage stamps; there were also the schoolmaster and his wife, who would no doubt improve on acquaintance; the gardener up at the Hall never by any chance

came to the station empty-handed. Then again, a station-master's wife and family—

'I 'm putting a supposititious case,' explained Ballard hurriedly.

—A station-master's wife and family travelled all over the kingdom at one-fourth of the ordinary fare, besides which free passes could be obtained occasionally, and there was a holiday to be obtained towards the late part of the summer. Then consider the freshness of the air compared with that of, say, Exmouth Street of an evening, with the naphtha lamps flaring, the smell of butchers' shops, the pease pudding, gutters full of discarded vegetables. Think of the walks here!

'You must come and see the village,' said Ballard. 'Put on your jacket and let's slip out without letting them know.'

'Miss Jeffrey will be upset.'

'She always is. Besides, you know, I haven't heard much of the sound of your voice for many a long day. Let me shut the door quietly. Where 's that dog of mine got to?'

The little woman felt importance in disregarding the imploring notice on a board; Ballard caught her as she jumped down on the ballast and gave her a hand in climbing on the other side. He opened the wicket-gate with his carriage-key, and called out to the office-boy, now smoking a piece of cane with relish, to keep eyes open and see that no one ran off with the station; as they went down through the one street of the village (which had here and there made attempts of adventuring

into side streets, but had never succeeded in getting beyond one or two cottages) women came to the diamond-paned windows and peered curiously; men outside the inn touched their caps in a respectful way; a girl driving in a high cart, boy groom at the back with folded arms, gave smart recognition with a twirl of the whip. Youngsters coming from afternoon school stood still, fingers in mouths and reddening when Mrs. Galer nodded and smiled at them; one or two of the most self-possessed said in a whisper:

'Ullo, Mas' Ballard!'

And ran, affrighted at their temerity, as though for their lives. Clear of the street the two went through a gate and across a meadow to a stile, which Ballard with a run nearly cleared in one jump, but not quite; he insisted on trying again, although Mrs. Galer begged him not to do so, and at the fourth attempt succeeded; he remarked as he waited to regain breath that he could do it easily enough when a boy, and regretted he had not kept himself in form. Although Ballard had expressed a desire to hear her voice, he gave the little woman few opportunities of giving proof of her capability for vivacious conversation; he talked with scarcely a comma and certainly without a full-stop. In Clerkenwell Ballard had been sometimes dull, often morose, never garrulous; here, in the country, he seemed on the very edge of breaking into song. He performed more feats of jumping by going across ditches to obtain flowers, and by the time they had crossed two meadows and skirted

a field he held a bunch of white violets, to be taken home to Janie Wills and the baby. He remembered to ask after the health of everybody, including old Leadbetter; old Leadbetter ought to come down into the country, he said; people lived for ever down in the country. Ballard did not wait for replies, but rattled on as one disinclined or too nervous to stop; amongst other things he mentioned that his sister, after being engaged for fourteen years, had, to the great scandal of her village, suddenly announced her determination to marry the man.

'You're quiet,' he said presently. 'Anything the matter?'

'Good gracious, no,' she cried. 'Why, I never have anything to complain about.'

'I admit you never complain, but I've often thought—only, of course, it's no business of mine.'

'The business couldn't be going on better.'

That wasn't exactly, precisely, what I meant.' His speech showed the old signs of hesitation. 'Not quite what I was driving at. I know your heart is in your business, but what I wondered, what I wasn't quite sure about, was whether'—with a burst of frankness—'whether it was anywhere else. Hullo, hullo, is that a rabbit over there? Now if I'd only got my dog—can't think where the scamp's got to.' He paused for a moment, and then went on. 'Three year, wasn't it?'

'Three years!'

'Ever been to see him?'

'Do you think I ought? Would they let me?'

'I only asked the question,' said Ballard. 'Wonder what he'll do when he comes out?' She did not answer. 'Emigrate, I s'pose. There was some good in him, mind you. If he'd only got hold of the right sort of woman, instead of the wrong——'

'Let's turn back, shall we, Mr. Ballard. I think it's getting on for my time for a cup of tea. Or else it's the fresh air.'

They found the housekeeper and Miss Jeffrey in close and whispered conversation, which stopped immediately on their arrival; the housekeeper, with an unconvincing pretence of continuing the topic, said that it was all very well to talk, but that once you got the moth into clothes they were as good as done for. Apparently the housekeeper had extorted information of a reassuring nature, for she showed greater amiability towards Mrs. Galer, and, in handing the little woman a second cup of strong tea, expressed a hope that another visit would be paid in the following year, begging, however, that they would be sure to drop a line to say when they were coming, so that something like appropriate preparation might be made. She had objections to being caught on the hop. The housekeeper further declared herself gratified by the present visit, asserting that it had quite cheered her, and went on to describe the extreme vivacity that would characterise her own behaviour, but for adverse circumstances, becoming so enthusiastic on the subject that she monopolised the conversation.

'You see what I have to put up with,' whispered Ballard. The office-boy below had rung the brass bell, and they were hurrying downstairs. 'Can't you help me or do something?'

'Don't quite understand.'

'You ain't usually slow,' he urged, still in an undertone. 'I want you to come down here. And marry me. And make me happy.'

'Mr. Ballard!' she cried amazedly, 'I couldn't possibly leave London.'

'London can do without you. And I can't. Sell the business or let Sid take it on. Think it over whilst the train 's coming in, and if you feel you can say Yes, wave your handkerchief out of the carriage window. And thanks for the visit.'

The short office-boy having evaded Mrs. Galer's obvious attempts to kiss him, took the management whilst his station-master assisted the ladies into a third-class compartment, calling the front guard Bill and the rear guard Tim, to their great annoyance, hurrying the other passengers, slamming doors with decision. A white terrier trotted up and tried to persuade its master that it had been searching for him throughout the afternoon.

'Mr. Ballard 's still looking,' cried Miss Jeffrey excitedly, as the train went. 'Wave your handkerchief, Mrs. Galer. Make haste, or else it 'll be too late.'

'Keep your head well out of the window,' said Mrs. Galer, disregarding the instruction, 'and you 'll get it knocked clean off.'

'I don't want that to happen,' said the dressmaker, taking the corner seat quickly.

Only one letter had arrived during Mrs. Galer's absence. A small white envelope with, just under the flap, the embossed letters 'V. R.' She pressed the writing to her lips.

CHAPTER XVIII

SHE had persuaded Miss Jeffrey to allow the window to remain down on the journey home, arguing that ere they had a good chance of being in the country again it might be years, or it might be never; the dressmaker had agreed reluctantly, with the provision that if either or both expired suddenly from cold she (Miss Jeffrey) was not to be blamed. Yet here was the little woman—after bustling about half the night in order to compensate for absence—announcing that she had to catch a rather early train from town. The head girl ventured to ask whether the summons had been made by pleasure or by business, and Mrs. Galer, with a curtness which astonished the young women, causing them to look up open-eyed from their work, expressed a hope that the head girl would never know the trouble occasioned by the starting of a new steam laundry. She repented this unusual manner ere reaching the end of Kimmer Street, and running back surprised them in a close bunch of conversation, and told them all that if they were good girls and did but stick to their work through the day in the manner popularly, but erroneously, attributed to niggers, she would bring back for them a box of sweets. She had, in the hurry, forgotten

to run up and ask Mr. Leadbetter how he was progressing, and to tell him he looked better; had omitted to kiss the baby, to give a dozen warnings to Janie Wills, and having remedied these oversights with celerity, and having given to Milly's boy a special hug, she started again in her normal mood of cheerfulness, humming, for the better acceleration of progress on the way to Farringdon Street and the City, the march of the Grenadier Guards. Once in a station, she appeared to be possessed of the idea that some one might be following her, and at the booking-office she asked loudly for a third return at fourpence, returning a few minutes later to another window to purchase a more expensive ticket.

At first, on arriving at her destination, she walked briskly along the hard, white, dusty road, but presently went more leisurely. Once she took her handkerchief out; with a shake of the head denoting disapproval of weakness, she put it back again. When, following the instructions obtained at the station, she took a turning that went through a broad open space of country, and saw at the end of this road a high wall with intermittent ramps, enclosing buildings of which she could only just see the roofs, she put her hand to her throat and stopped for a moment. No shade here. Civil Guard, with carbines, on sentry go; one high up near a semaphore.

She gave a gentle movement to the black knocker of the high door and waited. She knocked again with more of resolution; a wicket in the high door opened, and a man, appearing there, asked her

whether she were in a hurry, pointing out that the afternoon was the proper time for visiting. He gave up this aggressive tone on Mrs. Galer acquainting him with her desire; recognising that the visitor differed from the usual type of callers, he asked her not to mind waiting a bit whilst he sent word to the governor. Would she step into this side-room, and would she care to see the newspaper? Nothing much in it, apart from a rumour that the poor old Queen did not feel quite up to her usual mark; probably not true, said the warder, but if true, it only showed royalty had to face trouble like the rest of us. She tried to read the war news, but the printed words would not remain still; she looked through at the barred pen where visitors saw friends. Relief came when the door of the small room opened, and the governor appeared to interrogate, to stroke his white, pointed beard, and say he would see. Presently a warder came to conduct her. The way was not far, but it seemed like several miles; around buildings and across the triangular parade ground. The warder told her that the small yellow-bricked building was the mortuary.

'Visitor'—announcement at the top of the stairs at a door marked 'Prisoners,' that had an outer protection of iron bars—'for Armytage!'

The little woman felt too nervous to use all of her ordinary powers of observation; noticed only that the wooden floor was bare excepting for narrow strips of cocoanut matting up the centre with branch lines going off between the beds on either side. Windows protected outside by high, spiked iron bars. On the

walls, where she expected to see texts, framed lists headed 'Rules and Regulations'; over the occupied beds, where faces on pillows looked at her curiously and eagerly, blue diet cards with small white cards gave written information. A mixed scent of clean soap and medicine. At one of the beds a male nurse arguing firmly. A few self-sympathetic groans. On a wooden box some printed cards headed 'Things a Christian Ought to Know.'

'Here we are!' said the assistant warder. 'Here to the left. Not more than five minutes, because he's in rather a——. Just round behind this screen.'

The head on the pillow resembled the other heads which had looked at her on the way down the main-line of cocoanut matting; hair cut so close that the blue skin showed beneath; beard clipped. The captain's eyes were nearly closed, and it was not until she touched the hand outside the coverlet that a light in his eyes showed that he recognised her.

'I suppose,' said the assistant warder, 'you can't oblige me, ma'am, with such a thing as a pipeful of tobacco. No?' Slightly disappointed. 'Only wondered whether you'd got any about you. It's the one thing we have to look specially after when visitors come. Go on talking; don't mind me.' He stepped back.

'Come to see you, captain,' she said, controlling her voice. 'Whatever made you get ill?'

'Mere thoughtlessness,' he said, with an effort to assume his old manner. 'One can't remember everything, Mrs. Galer.'

'You'll soon pull round. Any one else been to see you?'

'There is no one else whom I wanted to see.' He tried to give an inclination of the head. 'Hope you did not mind being called my sister?'

'Aren't there any of your real rel'tives you'd like to get the governor——' He frowned, and she did not finish the inquiry.

'I've been thinking over my life,' he said, turning his eyes away from her and speaking slowly, 'whilst I've been here in this not very cheerful place. Trying to find excuses for myself, and I have experienced some difficulty in doing so. Seems a shame to have dragged you all the way down from London just to tell you this.' His face took suddenly a tired, absent look, his forehead became damp; Mrs. Galer gripped his hand, gave him time to recover, and prompted him when he was ready to speak again. He apologised. 'This is—this is my excuse,' he went on. She had to bend now in order to hear him; the officer in the corner of the screen glanced around. 'I have never really found my equal. I was below my own people; far below them. If you had known my sisters you wouldn't shake your head like that. And then somehow the people I came to mix with—but that was my own fault, you understand—were below me. And between the two I came what is commonly termed a——'

'A cropper!' she suggested quietly.

'Exactly!'

'Can't be helped, captain,' she said encouragingly, 'and perhaps all this is meant for your

good. For what we know it may be a blessing in disguise.'

'The disguise, if I may say so, is sufficiently complete.'

'Ah, but, captain, we've got to look at these things the right way round. Why, when you come out of this place, nobody will recognise you.'

'That's true!'

'You'll be able to begin life afresh, and you can be right away from those Islington people, and if there's anything I can do to help, I will. The business is getting on like one o'clock. Four new customers last week, and good ones too, with grown-up families. And the chance of a big boarding-house custom. And Sidney, you'd never believe what a clever boy he is; knows foreign languages by now. So that, as I say——'

'I believe I shall trespass on your good nature to some extent.'

'Right!' said Mrs. Galer heartily.

'I want you to do me a great service. I want you, if you will, to look after the funeral.'

'Whose, captain?'

'Mine,' he said.

She rose and turned her head and looked at the letter and figures on the card at the head of his bed. Wondered vaguely what the letter meant, and whether it indicated commendation. The officer coughed, and she sat down again.

'Thought you'd guess,' remarked the captain in his even voice. 'Fact of the matter is, I'm rather

worse than they think. And you 're the only friend I shall see from the outside world.'

'I 'm glad,' she said quietly—'glad you call me your friend.'

'What I wanted to say to you was this. That,' he passed a trembling hand over his closely-cut hair, —'that you are the best woman I ever met. That 's all. Don't mind going now, do you? Thank you ever so much. Good-bye, and Heaven—makes one begin to think about Heaven—Heaven bless you!'

She wanted to say something, but he turned away, and the officer came forward. She kissed her hand and laid it on the captain's head; then she nodded to the man, and he conducted her out on to the narrow line of cocoanut matting. She looked back at the last moment, but the captain had not moved; the male nurse was going in the direction of the bed.

There being a choice of stations she took the nearer, and it seemed in accord with the day that she should lose her train; a porter, who made her wish for the comforting presence of Ballard, took some time in pointing out to her that she might have caught it if (first) she had started earlier, or (second) if she had walked more quickly. The porter remarked that at any rate she was in good time for the next train, and asked if she lived in London. On receiving her reply, he inquired whether she had ever run across a lady named Richards, a cousin of his, in service Bayswater way, wherever that was, and on Mrs. Galer confessing that this fortune had not been hers, the porter gave

a slow look of artfulness, as one who had discovered by cross-examination a flaw which destroyed the value of the whole of the evidence. The little woman took opportunity to escape, and started on a walking match against herself up and down the platform, going rapidly in order to avoid the pain of thinking. She wanted to get back and talk to Milly's boy; there seemed no one else in whom she could confide.

At the junction, where she had to change, there was only just time to rush across and prevent a ticket-collector from locking the door of a compartment, and, despite his protests, jump in.

'Can't quite place you,' confessed Mrs. Galer. She looked across at the young man in the corner, who was rubbing his hand over his short sandy beard, looked also at the two uniformed warders who accompanied him. 'You have the advantage of me.'

'First time for a long while I 've had the advantage of anybody,' he growled. 'Try the name of Robert. 'Ave a shot at the name of Coates.'

'Wherever you been all this time?' asked Mrs. Galer, without offering her hand. 'We thought you were dead.'

'Got too much respect for meself!'

'You 're looking well.'

'He 's been leading a healthy life,' interposed one of the warders. 'Been well looked after, and able to keep nice regular hours.'

'Got into trouble then, did you?'

'Have I ever done anything else?' demanded

Bob Coates strenuously. ''Aven't I always been in hot water? 'Aven't my footsteps been always dogged by desaster, and fate, and what not? Why, I reckon I ought to be looked on as a object of pity more than compassion.'

'Don't make a row,' ordered the warder. 'No business to talk at all by rights.'

'Not make a row? Why, what am I to make, then? All very well for you to talk, but you just put yourself for a moment in my place.' The warders declined in the most definite manner. 'I've had to keep quiet for some considerable space of time, and if you think I'm not going to take full advantage of me opportunities you're making the biggest error you ever made in the 'ole course of your existence. And that's saying a lot.'

'He'll be out in a few weeks, ma'am,' explained one of the warders. 'We're just taking him back to Pentonville to finish up.'

'All this time,' she remarked, 'you've neglected to ask after baby.'

'Didn't know you'd got one.'

'I mean yours. Yours and poor Milly's.'

'Oh,' said Bob Coates, with sudden illumination. I remember. Is she still alive?'

'It's a boy, you horrible man.'

'That's right,' he said resignedly. 'Call me names. It's easy enough,' he gulped, and drew his arrow-marked sleeve across his eyes pathetically, 'easy enough to kick a man when he's down.'

'You deserve worse treatment than that,' she

declared heatedly. 'You're nothing more nor less than a disgrace.'

'Listen to what she's saying of,' he urged, addressing the warders, 'because likely as not I shall make a law case out of this.'

'*You're* the kind of person that ought to go out of the world be rights,' went on the little woman wrathfully, 'because you're no good to the world and nobody in the world wants you. You're an incubus, that's what you are!'

'She talks about my using language,' whined Mr. Coates to his companions, ''ark at her.'

'Best thing you can do is not to show your face anywhere where it's known. There's some womenfolk near us who remember you and the way you left poor Milly and her baby boy, and——'

'Is he like me at all?' asked Bob Coates, with an uneasy effort to give a new turn to the conversation. 'Does he resemble me in any way?'

'Hope not!'

'I reckon it's a bit rough on a man,' he said, shaking his head desolately, 'that after he's got into trouble, and he's nearly served his time, that almost the first person he meets, instead of saying how pleased she is to see him——'

'Goo' gracious!' cried the little woman vehemently, 'I'm not pleased to see you. I never wanted to see you again. Nobody ever wanted to see you again.'

The warders said that all this talking had better stop now.

'I'll call round and see you, Mrs. Galer, some time

Soon as I come out and I 've had time to settle down and look about a bit.'

'Better wait till you 're invited.'

'I 've never been a one to stand on etiquette,' said Bob Coates. 'Besides, I want to see that that boy of mine 's being brought up properly. I look forward to him to be the breadwinner when his poor father is past work.'

'You wouldn't dare!'

'Oh, wouldn't I?' he remarked acutely. The warders gave a definite look. 'You don't seem to recognise that a parent's got his rights as well as his duties!'

CHAPTER XIX

THEY said in Kimmer Street that she had taken a bigger mouthful than she could manage to swallow. Ambition, said Kimmer Street, enlarging the argument whilst waiting for a second cup of tea, ambition was all very well in itself, kept within bounds something could be said for it, but ambition that refused to be controlled by reins and ran away with its driver (she had just ordered two new vans), could mean nothing but disaster and bankruptcy and ruin, and goodness only knew what. Thus did Kimmer Street, in its wisdom, account for a new look of seriousness worn by Mrs. Galer, and a new habit of standing for a few moments at the door of the office, and looking across the roadway at nothing. The girl in the florist's in Rosoman Street, treasuring a now elderly grievance of having supplied a ten-and-sixpenny wreath and not being permitted to know its last destination, still complained bitterly when opportunity arose, pointing out to other customers that things had indeed come to a pretty pass if *she* could not be intrusted with a secret, and this, frequently repeated, added to the general sense of injury. Part of the new steam laundry was open and in working order, and the

corner shop had for some time borne the painted intimation—

BRANCH OFFICE

There Janie Wills sat at a desk, if you please, with a pen over each ear and a fore-finger stained with ink; her exhibition of masterfulness with Mrs. Galer away at the new place was shocking to contemplate; a day girl engaged to assist in looking after Milly's boy, and discourage a natural gift on the part of that youth for finding mischief, trembled in her buttoned boots whenever Janie's voice was raised; never was this governing spirit more insistent than when Johnnie Leadbetter called to read to his old grandfather—now christened by bitterly disappointed relatives 'Kind Words'—or to bring his own grown-up weekly parcel; it was reported of Johnnie amongst his colleagues that the wearing of clean collars and cuffs had become with him a perfect hobby.

Just as Kimmer Street, having enjoyed for some time the luxury of complaining of Mrs. Galer's cheerfulness, took exception to her occasional moments of abstraction, so, having found in her presence a good subject for reproaches, they now felt injured because of her absence. The new steam laundry, a long, plain building, made a good step every week towards perfection and demanded an increasing amount of her time. The staff of girls trebled, and nothing but acuteness enabled her to keep up the fine flower of her staff and rid herself of the weeds; the rejected went about declaring

that rather than work with such a slave-driver, they would give up laundry work and go into domestic service; the best became affected by Mrs. Galer's pride in the business, and showed signs of conceit when they arrived each morning and saw the new vans with horses in line at the entrance; the vans had on each side the words 'The Victoria Laundry,' and at the back the words, 'What We Say We Do, We Do Do.' She still had a preference for unmarried assistants; they were not so reliable as the married, but they were brighter. The girls liked Mrs. Galer, and the one or two men feared her; the engine-room attendant, a grimy person, announced the discovery that she knew a lot. The only thing said against her privately was that you never knew when she was likely to pop in. She would go through the sorting-room, with its wicker baskets marked in black paint 'Galer,' through the washing-room, where restless iron cylinders having been packed with clothes went round and reversed, look in at the hot drying-room, go upstairs to the long ironing-room, and having spoken to everybody and given orders, went out of the door through the office, and you might say to yourself with relief, 'Well, now we can do what we like!' but she would return on some pretext in less than a minute, and after a look around go again, saying to the forewoman that she would be back again directly, and then you might not see her perhaps for a couple of hours. But you could be sure that she was somewhere, working energetically on behalf of the business. Just before the new laundry reached the stage of completeness,

two civil-spoken, silk-hatted men called to see Mrs. Galer, introduced by the brothers at Willesden, and ventured to ask whether she could see her way to joining in an amalgamation consisting of three other businesses besides her own; they pencilled figures on the counter, arguing that it would be a fine thing for everybody, and, encouraged by the smile on Mrs. Galer's face, confided news that where they, for their part, hoped to recoup themselves for the trouble they were taking, was to be in floating the concerns as a limited company; Mrs. Galer would have to help them by preparing a new set of books, giving a gratifying account of the profits of the last three years. Mrs. Galer listened to the end, and then asked whether they cared for a shower-bath of soap-suds; they left at once, remarking, in discouraged tones, that in matters of finance women were hopeless.

Sidney wrote to say that he would endeavour to come up for the formal opening, but he had been greatly pressed with special study, and little time now remained; this was his last year; necessary, therefore, that he should make the most of it. These admirable sentiments partially satisfied Mrs. Galer, but she wrote again, and Janie Wills addressed another envelope, and Sidney was informed that his speech was being anticipated with interest; it would be a great disappointment if he failed to come. This proved to be the right kind of fly to use, for he wired at once to say that he would come and make a speech, bringing with him one Bashford. Whereupon Mrs. Galer centred all her attention and all

her efforts on suitable preparations, and rumour passing news around of these and using, as always, the multiplication table, many girls applied to be taken on as supernumeraries, but a few definite inquiries forced them into admissions, and they were sent away promptly. A reporter from the local paper called to collect information, and every girl bought a copy of the newspaper on the following Friday, because it referred to them as a bevy of attractive young damsels; the impressionable reporter went so far as to defy Greece in the olden days to produce their equal (which, when one came to think of it, was not such a daring challenge as one might consider at first sight), and wrote that in these times, with the immigrant alien taking possession of entire boroughs of London, it was something to remember with pride that here we remained English; this he held to be due to the circumstance that we still had men and women with the (a long string of compliments) possessed by Mrs. Galer. The little woman inquired of a calender girl who had worked in Soho the meaning of the word *bonhomie*, and on receiving the information, remarked (and the gifted translator agreed) that it was not true to say of her that she was stout, and even if it had been, it would have been more polite and tactful not to have printed the information. Still, all this public notice was gratifying.

Each girl was invited by card to bring either one brother or one gentleman friend, the marrieds to bring husbands; the elders warned the more youthful to exercise care in selection, a single rowdy person

being capable of spoiling the evening and interfering with the pleasure of the well-behaved. Any nervousness on this point disappeared on the night so soon as the guests began to arrive. Whether that they were in the suits usually reserved for Sunday, whether that they were being brought as the guests of ladies, whether they were chilled by sight of long tables set out in the ironing-room (the machines shifted to the wall and a screen hiding the stove), or hint of aristocracy furnished by the cigar resting by the side of alternate plates—whatever the cause, the fact soon appeared evident that a milder-mannered set of young men never sat down to a public entertainment. So that presently, after coffee had been cleared away and the large dishes removed that had contained sandwiches, the girls had to goad them into conversation.

'Wake up sleepy'ead! What's the matter with you?'

'Don't be frightened to talk to me, I shan't eat you.'

'You *are* a chatterbox! Why you've said nearly three words and a 'alf since you first come in. You'll wear your face out if you talk so much.'

'Anything disagreed with you?'

Mrs. Galer hurried up and down between the long tables, anxious concerning the success of what the reporter in his notebook had already decided to call an inaugural banquet; and did her best to assist the girls in arousing their companions by saying, 'Come come, now, no flirting!' but this affected reproach seemed but to send the youths into a deeper

melancholy. Miss Jeffrey's Mr. Grimsteed had charged himself with the duty of providing the musical part of the entertainment, promising to engage the finest talent that could be obtained at a certain sum per head, to cover, as he termed it euphemistically, travelling expenses; it appeared later that some of the best singers in the borough of Finsbury, having obtained this sum from Grimsteed beforehand, had persuaded themselves that the transaction might at that point be taken as closed. Sidney and his friend Bashford were not due until eight o'clock; Mrs. Galer hoped to goodness the guests would bestir themselves before that hour arrived, otherwise the speeches would be received in silence, and her Sidney might be disappointed; she felt particularly anxious that he should take the first steps to-night in making himself popular with the staff. Mrs. Galer's quick mind decided something must be done; looking round, she decided swiftly what the something should be.

'Drop that!'

The tall girl, assisting with the air of an aristocrat making her first acquaintance with the working classes, obeyed at once; contents of the tray smashed on the floor; portions of cups and saucers and plates rolled in a distracted way, every piece searching for its fellow. The guests stood up to witness the results of the disaster; even the morose young men yelled with amusement at the sight of Janie Wills's astonished countenance.

'Whatever made you tell me to do it?' inquired the girl as they picked up the fragments.

'Takes an accident to make some people laugh,' replied Mrs. Galer. 'They'll be all right now.'

The little woman had reason; the thaw set in. Up and down the table couples told each other delightedly how the incident had occurred; young men rose from their seats, and gave an imitation of the way in which Janie had let the tray slip; young women held sides and said, exhaustedly, that they would willingly give threepence to see it happen again. At this moment, Grimsteed appeared with the first detachment of the men whom he called by the general title of five bobbers; a swollen-faced lad (who could vamp the accompaniment to any tune, with occasional runs to decorate the simplicity of the accompaniment which proved to the audience that he was a born musician), sat at the pianoforte up at the end where the hand-starching was usually done, and Grimsteed himself, before going on to the Agricultural Hall, sang a bass song about a man in a coal mine with a refrain and a last line of notes going deliberately deep and deeper, so that listening you said to yourself, 'Well, he can't possibly go lower,' and each time Grimsteed found a deeper note, finishing when you had begun to feel reckless and to give up guessing where he would stop, with a note so deep that it gave no sound at all. The guests listened open-mouthed with amazement; when they recognised that the last note of the last chorus had come, they slapped the tables enthusiastically, and the girls screamed

'Engcore!'

But Grimsteed only bowed, waved a hand in the

direction of waiting singers, pointed to the clock, bowed again, blew a kiss to the ladies, saying, 'Share that amongst you!' and finally jumped from the platform.

'Don't you feel proud of him?'

Miss Jeffrey, who had come in, shook her head in answer to Mrs. Galer's question. 'I reelly don't know,' said the dressmaker desolately, 'whether it's safe to marry a gifted man.'

'You take what you can get and be thankful.'

'All very well for you to talk,' said Miss Jeffrey; 'you don't know what love is.'

'Ladies,' shouted one of the singers, 'kind permission, beg submit, written specially for me, entitled "Ain't it peculiar!"' In an undertone to the swollen-faced pianist: 'Ready when you are, Sam!'

This was what they wanted. This was better even than the smashing of cups and saucers. A song with a chorus that could be learnt at the first hearing, a song roared in a voice which filled the room. By the second verse girls and young men had caught the way of it, and their heads back, they chanted the refrain to the ceiling:—

'When you are courting a fair young girl,
Ain't it sing—u—lar,
Your brain all at once seems to be in a whirl
All on account of a fair young girl.
Oh, ain't it,
Ain't it,
Ain't it,
Ain't it peculiar!'

Mrs. Galer, the success of her party now assured, nodded happily to the rhythm of the songs as one

followed another; it startled her presently—when every voice was lifted in an exceptionally enticing chorus, sent to the roof through the smoke of cigars—to see at the top of the staircase her boy, her Sidney; in the excitement she had nearly forgotten him. She ran down between the tables.

'My dear boy!' she cried, 'my own dear boy!'

'Mother, mother,' he protested; 'really! Allow me,' he said precisely, 'to introduce my friend Bashford.'

'Pretty well?' asked Mrs. Galer agreeably. 'You've brought a fine night with you.'

Bashford appeared to be one of those youths who do not speak without due premeditation, and he took off his glasses now and rubbed them carefully with his handkerchief.

'Bashford,' went on Sidney (he had acquired a new voice, and his mother looked up at him wonderingly), 'is going to make a special study of social questions later on, and I thought, or rather he thought, that he might find something to interest him here to-night.'

'Tolerably well,' said Bashford, having decided that there could be no great harm in giving the information. 'Not more than tolerably. A slight cold, perhaps, that affects the head.'

'So long as you keep it off the chest,' said Mrs. Galer briskly. 'Best thing when you find a cold coming on is to put your feet straight into mustard and hot water. Get your mother to put the kettle on and——'

'I think we might look over the establishment. Bashford, you have your notebook?'

'But no pencil,' complained the tall youth.

'Here you are,' said Mrs. Galer. 'I always carry one just 'ere. You 're going to speak a few words to them presently, Sidney?'

'I shall not be more than twenty minutes.' He looked at the excited, noisy gathering.

'You 'll stay longer than that?'

'I mean that my address will not take longer than that.'

'Oh, my dear! They'll never listen.' He smiled with the air of one who knew better. 'Some one's going to propose my health, and what I thought was that you might answer. On behalf of the firm, you understand.'

'The general trend of my discourse,' remarked Sidney, 'will be directed to the question of co-operation.'

'There,' said Bashford, 'there I am afraid you and I, Galer, are not exactly at one. I shall have to make my position clear.'

'What?' cried Mrs. Galer, 'are you, too—— Oh, my gracious!'

She found a lamp, of which Bashford, a well-mannered youth, offered to take charge, but she would not hear of this, declaring herself used to carrying things, and she conducted them away from the chattering voices—everybody talking now and nobody caring to listen—and through the various rooms of the new building. Recovered her spirits in pointing out the big ledgers in the office, with red-ink figures, and a number for every customer; the starching boxes, the sullied

table-cloths that had just come in, and the pile of pure white table-cloths that were going out, the ironing-machines for collars and for shirts; any fears that she had entertained disappeared when she saw that Sidney was giving all his attention. Bashford, his friend, busied himself with pencil and notebook, occasionally asking a question when the London accent clouded the information.

'It must,' said Bashford politely, 'be a source of great pride to you, Mrs. Galer, to think that you have carried through this enterprise so successfully.'

'Lots to be done yet.'

'My mother,' said Sidney, patting her shoulder, 'is a wonderful little person.'

'Uncle of mine,' said Bashford, 'afterwards married Lady Cranson, once tried his hand at this sort of thing, in an amateur way, up at Notting Dale, and came the most fearful smash you ever saw in the whole course of your existence.'

'Perhaps he was clever at politics or something. Shall we be getting back? I expect they're all keen to get the speechmaking over. Feel nervous, dear?'

'Used to find something like hesitation,' answered her son, 'when I was less experienced. But not now.'

'*I'm* all of a tremble,' she confessed.

They were at the patriotic stage at the long tables, and this a deaf person could have recognised, for there was a defiant look on every face, the pianist was striking the keys aggressively.

'So long as the flag waves blithely in the breeze,
So long as hist'ry lasts that has been written.
The one who can conquer on the land and on the seas,
Is the noble-minded, true-'earted Briton.'

They gave the last chorus twice, and then sat back in their chairs, scarlet with pride and self-satisfaction. A few of the senior girls cried for order, and the forewoman took from the side pocket of her skirt a leaf which had been torn from a memorandum-book. 'I think,' said the forewoman, taking for some reason an aggrieved tone, 'that we ought not to dream of breaking up without telling Mrs. Galer—'

Loud cheering.

—'Without telling Mrs. Galer what a nice evening she 's given us, and how much we are obliged to her for so doing.' The forewoman sat down, but, reminded of an omission, stood up again quickly. 'Forgot to mention that of course we 're very glad to see Master Sidney, our future governor, amongst us. Some of us knew him when he wore knickerbockers, and—— There!' said the forewoman regretfully to her neighbours; 'knew I should go and say something I ought not to.'

The two young men declared there was no necessity for Mrs. Galer to see them to the station, but the little woman insisted on doing so, urging a desire on her part for fresh air; she found some difficulty in accommodating herself to the step until she hit upon the device of taking two to their one. Sidney, flushed with the excitement that oratory brings, remarked that he had intended to speak a word to Janie Wills; perhaps his mother would make his apologies. Bashford inquired whether

they always hummed 'We won't go home till morning' when listening to speeches; surely unnecessary to select occasions of the kind for the rehearsal of farmyard imitations. Mrs. Galer replied that it was a way they had, and too much importance should not be placed upon it.

'They listened to *you*, Sidney,' she remarked, looking up at her son as they went along the pavement. People saluted her here and there with a wave of the hand, and stopped to look after her; she hoped they recognised that Sidney was her boy, not Bashford. Gentlemanly young fellow, Bashford, but not, so to speak, in the same town with her Sidney. 'They scarcely made any row whilst you were talking.'

'Wish you'd teach them to put the hand in front of the mouth when they yawn.'

'And you seemed to say everything you wanted to say so clear and distinct.'

'There was one omission,' said he. 'Can't think how it was I managed to forget to make a reference to it. The woman spoke of me rather absurdly as their future governor; I meant to have corrected that impression. Don't you come any further.'

She stopped with a gasp. Looked up at the name on the side road curiously, although she knew it quite well. Went a few steps after they had gone, and stopped.

I shall begin to think,' she said to herself, her hand at her lips, 'that God doesn't mean to be kind to me.'

CHAPTER XX

ON a bitterly cold day of February old Leadbetter (a patient whose many vagaries had made young doctors look aged, and whose continuance of life was considered by some of his elderly colleagues as amounting to the proportions of a swindle) took a change. Clerkenwell and London, and Great Britain, and half the world were mourning; Kimmer Street had every blind down; on the closed doors of the receiving-office of the Victoria Steam Laundry a card tacked with a deep black border, the words written by Janie Wills, after tearful consultation with her mistress. Above the coloured portrait in the shop a crape bow had been pinned. Mrs. Galer and Miss Jeffrey set out before it was light, and walking all the way to Hyde Park—the little woman thought, but did not speak, of the captain—secured good places on the pedestal of the Achilles statue, and waited there until the stately procession, with its white-draped gun-carriage, came and slowly went. The two lost themselves in the crowd, and found a very young policeman, who, challenged, admitted his identity, and became crimson of face on being obliged to admit inability to direct them. 'You see Mrs. Galer,' urged the young policeman, taking off his helmet and rubbing

the inside of it with his handkerchief, 'I'm a comparative stranger.' Fortunately there were colleagues of a more spacious experience, and one of these informed the two ladies; a short cut enabled them to find themselves back in Rosebery Avenue, and on the straight road for home. They told Janie Wills everything from start to finish, with a good word for the German Emperor.

'I was afraid I couldn't like him,' remarked Mrs. Galer, 'but I find I do!'

Milly's boy, shouldering his toy gun, marched round the sitting-room (used because the day was special), potting a few stray Boers, and declining to answer a word unless addressed as Lord Roberts. Mrs. Galer regretted once more that she had never taken opportunity of seeing the dear old lady alive, and Miss Jeffrey was bewailing her excess of loyalty in wearing a pair of new boots on the occasion, when the thump of Mr. Leadbetter's stick came above the kitchen ceiling. The sound appeared less insistent, less commanding than usual.

'I'll go!' said Mrs. Galer. 'And I shan't say a word to the old gentleman about it, because he'll only pass some remark, and then I shall lose me temper.'

'I like your idea of losing temper,' said Janie Wills satirically. 'You're so much out of practice that you're little better than an amateur.'

'Make her find out, Miss Jeffrey, who we saw as we were trying to make our way home!'

'Not my Johnnie?'

'Guessed it,' said Mrs. Galer amusedly, 'guessed it in once!'

'In his uniform?'

Mr. Leadbetter demanded from his bed whether there were no noises of any kind in the street, or whether it was that he had suddenly become deaf. Instructed on this point, he inquired the true reason, adding that it seemed high time some one aroused the workers; appeared to him that during the years he had been lying there the place had been becoming quieter every day.

'Clerkenwell isn't what it was,' said the old patient gloomily. 'To remember it as I remember it when it took the lead in every political question of the day, and to see it as it is now——! Bless my soul, you wouldn't believe it was the same place. When I helped Bradlaugh to draw up the proclamation in sixty-seven, Clerkenwell *was* Clerkenwell.'

Mrs. Galer, unable to endure this criticism of the neighbourhood, found herself compelled to give explanation. She had long since determined, she said, never to mention a certain name again in his presence, but since he had raised the question, he must listen, and listen quietly, and then the whole matter could be put away, and not referred to again.

'Last Tuesday?' asked the old man, when Mrs. Galer had finished.

'She'd been ill for some days.'

'Why wasn't I told?' He sat up in bed.

'There you go, getting excited! Whatever was the use of telling you? You couldn't have done anything for the poor dear, and, holding the opinions you do, I suppose you wouldn't if you could.'

The old man looked hard at a portrait of Garibaldi on the wall. Mrs. Galer measured his medicine carefully, with her thumb-nail at the dividing mark.

'She and I,' he began slowly, 'she and I were born in the same year.'

'You ought to have considered it an honour.'

'In the very same year. I was seventeen when she came to the throne. Looking back, looking back on it all, I can remember a lot of hard words I used against her and her family, and,' slapping the counterpane, 'I meant 'em at the time. I was as advanced as any one in my opinions. I never allowed any one to go in front of me. Odger use to say to me——'

'Mind you drink that all up.'

'In this,' he quoted, holding the wine-glass, 'in this I bury all unkindness.' He gave the empty glass to Mrs. Galer. 'There's an end of it. I've outlived her, and I meant to outlive her, and now I take back everything!'

'All you've said against the Royal Family?' she cried delightedly.

'All!' he declared, with solemnity. 'All that I've ever said against any individual member. All that I've ever said against the system.'

'I would have given anything,' said Mrs. Galer, 'if only you could have made up the quarrel before she went. But I s'pose that wasn't to be!'

Kimmer Street nodded its head and said an approving word for Providence on noting that following this declaration, old Leadbetter's health, which had remained stationary for years, began to improve.

Kimmer Street said here came additional proof of the value of the saying that there was no harm in keeping a civil tongue in your head. His aggrieved relatives did not conceal their annoyance with his methods, and when he walked, with the assistance of his grandson, Johnnie, so far as Northampton Square, the few of his remaining contemporaries sent memory back, and bewailing loudly their wasted sixpences, said he must not expect that they were going to buy wreaths for him continually day after day; that, indeed, having once offered him a token of respect of which he had not availed himself, he had no right to expect anything further in the shape of floral tributes. A young lord with advanced opinions called one afternoon, and the old Republican, instead of furnishing him with hints which would enable him to step out ahead from other adventurous political bloods on his side, gave serious words on the uselessness of expecting support from the average Londoner, and advised him to get rid of a stammer. The young lord took tea with Mrs. Galer, and assured her on his word of honour that her cake was the most delicious he had ever tasted; the little woman could never afterwards be sure whether or not she ought to blame herself for allowing the youth to go away under the incorrect impression that it was home-made. He knew the college where Sidney was now bringing studies to an end, and gave Milly's boy a kiss on the top of the curly hair, receiving in acknowledgment of treatment a butting at the waistcoat. Mrs. Galer, proud of the honour done to her house, remarked that lords

after all, seemed very much like other people, only more pleasant in their manner, and pointed out to Janie Wills the inaccuracies often to be found in works of fiction; Janie Wills devoted for some weeks so much of her conversation to the incident of the call—'Let me show you how he shook hands with me'—that Johnnie Leadbetter began, in spite of his official position, to consider the advisability of remodelling his views in regard to the usefulness of the Upper House, and quoted a text from the Bible with gloomy approval. Janie Wills promptly retorted with an inquiry, in reply to which Johnnie Leadbetter was forced to admit that he himself had never learned how to spin.

Mrs. Galer, with a banking account and a chequebook, nevertheless preserved her earlier habits of considering, in regard to most new expenditures, whether they could be afforded; but just as there was no hesitation in sending remittances to Sidney, so there were no half-measures taken so soon as Milly Coates's boy was ready to take instruction. He had made some efforts under the guidance of Janie, and could spell cat and dog without being quite sure which was which; could count up to twelve if not interrupted; had committed to heart the words of a brief recitation entitled 'When I 'm a great, big man,' which he gave only on occasions when begged urgently not to do so. The little woman had determined that no time should be wasted, and, finding in a street off Goswell Road a brass plate on railings, announcing that the Misses Pilgrim held there a Kindergarten School for

Young Ladies and Gentlemen, called, and found two old maids so much astonished at the prospect of a new pupil that they became moved to tears; Mrs. Galer at once entered the name and paid the fees in advance; an extra sum represented the expenses of transport for collecting Master Coates daily and returning him. The boy, informed of these arrangements, announced a definite decision, and it was not until Mrs. Galer declared that under no possible circumstances should he now be allowed to go to Charles Street, and that, instead, he should wait until he were old enough for the Board school, that he gave in, and consented to look forward with calm to the work of acquiring knowledge. She still kept some of Sidney's youthful garments, and these might have been used now; she decided, however, to give the boy an entirely new rig-out, and took him for this purpose to a superior shop in Upper Street, Islington, where groups of fair-haired, well-dressed youngsters gazed fixedly out of the windows, inviting matrons to find here models for their children.

'And now,' she said to the boy, as he prepared to walk out in his new suit, 'now you look quite the gentleman.'

To mark the importance of the occasion he was taken to Burgess's for cakes and a glass of milk, where he sat, a conceited, well-satisfied lad on a high stool, until Mrs. Galer detected in his eye the gaze of repletion. Close by was a penny wax-work show, and he urged Mrs. Galer that the top note should be placed on a memorable afternoon by a visit there; Mrs. Galer, assuring him that her Sidney

had never, as a boy, been spoiled and petted in this way, took him to the turnstile that he might be permitted to enjoy a feast of public celebrities. She always declared it made her feel quite young again to take the boy out; it recalled the days when Sidney had been small, and she felt more than repaid for anything she did when the boy said prayers at night, and after making formal applications in a hasty, uninterested way, as one who doubted whether his requests would be granted—beginning with 'Our Fa'v chart in 'Eaven,'—laid stress on his appeal that dear Auntie Galer should be blessed. If, in addition to this, he spontaneously hugged her, then Mrs. Galer knew that she was, indeed, a lucky woman to be allowed thus to live early days over again. The boy drew her attention to the entrancing group in the window, which gave to an interested public a free sight of the 'Approaching Coronation.' The King showed a nice sense of impartiality by wearing a cocked hat with a frock-coated suit; the Archbishop had evidently been borrowed from the criminal department.

'Penny extra for the top floor,' said the large woman in the pay-box. She put down her knife and fork, brought a head of tangled yellow hair, an affected voice and a scent of steak and onions to the arched space.

'Half-price for the child?'

'What next,' demanded the woman haughtily. 'He can see as much as a grown-up, can't he?'

'Civility costs nothing,' urged Mrs. Galer.

'Common sense is cheaper.'

'I expect,' said Mrs. Galer as she paid the money, 'that you get your little worries here the same as people do in other businesses?'

'No, I don't,' retorted the large woman with obstinacy. 'Don't get any little worries at all. Wish I had some little worries. Mine are all large ones. And, what's more, they're my own seeking.'

'That's bad!'

'I'm silly,' said the other, now in full enjoyment of self-depreciation, 'and every one who knows me says so. I've never realised when I was well off. Why, I can remember the time when I lived in the lap of luxury.' The boy tugged at Mrs. Galer's hand as hint that entertainment awaited them, but it was impossible to leave until the large woman had given a brief autobiographical sketch. Mrs. Galer recognised her now as the woman who had once, for a brief space, lived at Number Sixteen. 'And when he kicked the bucket, as you would say, and left me the show, you might think I should have had the intelligence to know when I was sitting in an easy-chair. Mightn't you, now?'

Mrs. Galer gave a non-committal movement of the head.

'But no!' with melancholy triumph; 'not me, bless you. The very first lazy, lumbering lout that came along and asked me, off I went to church with him like a—like a——' Her attempts at finding an appropriate simile failed.

'Won't he work, ma'am?'

'He'll do anything but that. And there's no family unfortunately; and no prospect.'

'Do you know that when I was first married——'

'I dare say,' said the proprietress of the waxwork show, suddenly losing interest in the conversation. 'Pass right through, please, and don't block up the gangway.'

Figures lined the way to the back room; all with unwholesome complexions and straight hair, all leaning slightly forward, all with the air of wearing some one else's clothes. Cuffs came well over unconvincing hands, and even dukes were content with shirt front. Pins took the place of buttons, and doubts that might well have been raised in regard to identity, were set at rest by the labels which each wore dependent from the neck. An eminent cricketer wore a straw hat coming well over the ears; an esteemed statesman seemed almost hidden in a silk hat. No other patrons in the room; dim light afforded by the candle inside the representation of the latest eruption of Mount Vesuvius, and an oil lamp hanging from the ceiling.

'Reelly couldn't tell you, my dear,' answered Mrs. Galer peering curiously. 'It's got no name on.' The small boy pressed the inquiry, apparently under the impression that valuable information was being withheld from him. 'Now don't you begin to ask too many questions. Come along upstairs.'

The exhibition appeared to be of a refined character, consisting mainly of royalties, and a representation which Mrs. Galer thought unconvincing of his Majesty's first Drawing-Room. The boy agreed, with some reluctance, to leave, and they descended.

'Lemme be!' wailed the boy. 'Lemme be, I tell you! Auntie, auntie, auntie! He 's hurting of me!'

'Put the boy down,' said Mrs. Galer returning sharply. 'Smack your own children if you like, but don't you dare touch him!'

'What did he give me a pinch for, then?'

''Tisn't his fault that he took you for one of the figures; you shouldn't be asleep here in the corner.'

'Thought I recognised the voice,' he said, coming into the light of the hanging oil-lamp. 'Haven't set eyes on you since we met last.'

'That,' said Mrs. Galer, 'was down at——'

''Ush!' begged Bob Coates anxiously. 'Don't talk so loud and don't talk so much. You women never know when to keep your mouths shut.'

'We know when it 's necessary to open them. Are you leading a honest life?'

'Honest,' he said emphatically, 'and dashed disagreeable. If this is what people call turning over a new leaf—Yes, you come pinching me again, my lad, that 's all. I 'll treat you so that your own father won't know you.'

'His father don't know him, as it is.' She knew at once that she had spoken impetuously. Taking the boy's hand she prepared to leave.

''Alf a sec.,' cried Bob Coates. 'There 's no 'urry. We don't close before 'leven at night, and only four 'alf pints allowed me between the hower of opening and hower of closing. I 'm come down to some-'ing!'

'Good evening!'

'No you don't. *Oh* no, you don't.' Interposing at the exit to the passage. 'Am I right in assuming that this little 'ound who's so 'andy with his pinches is my son?'

'He's Milly's boy.'

'Give us a kiss,' said Bob Coates benevolently. 'Give your long lost father a kiss, and tell him how glad you are to meet him. Ah!' with clumsy playfulness as the boy ran for protection to Mrs. Galer's skirts. '*I* see you! 'Ootchy, kootchy! 'Ere we go round the mulberry bush, the mulberry bush, the——'

'Don't sing to him,' recommended Mrs. Galer, as the boy hung to her affrighted. 'He's behaving himself all right.'

'I wasn't singing. I was reciting.'

'That's worse.'

'Don't quite like his manner,' complained Bob Coates after another effort to ingratiate himself by making a face at the boy. ''Tisn't the attitude a kid ought to take up in regard to his only remaining parent. He hasn't been brought up properly. Be rights he ought to fling hisself into my arms and fairly smother me with embraces.'

'You ought to have been smothered long ago. Come along, dear.'

'I'll pay you out for that remark,' cried Bob Coates, swinging his arm and hitting a new murderer. 'Fancy anybody wishing I was dead. Why, it shows you're nothing more nor less than a——'

As Mrs. Galer put her hands over the boy's ears

"GIVE YOUR LONG-LOST FATHER A KISS"

the woman came in from the pay-box and demanded to be informed concerning the trouble; ordered her husband, before receiving the information, to moderate his voice and get a broom and do some sweeping out; told Mrs. Galer that if people who came to see the show were not satisfied with it all they had to do was to get out into Upper Street with convenient despatch. Charge made for coming in certainly, but no charge made for going out. Bob Coates offered his defence in a plaintive, submissive voice.

'You never told me you 'd been married before.'

'My love!' protested Bob Coates, 'you never asked.'

'But why couldn't you have volunteered the information?'

'How many times,' he urged pathetically, 'how many times did you tell me when we was courting not to speak to you unless you spoke to me first? I try to do as you tell me and this is the result.'

'I think you 've got a very nice exhibition here,' remarked Mrs. Galer, 'and I 've enjoyed it—to a certain extent—and now the boy and me must see about getting home.'

'Let me look and find out whether I've got an odd farthing in the till,' said the large woman, 'for the little dear to buy some sweets with. Nice bright clean face. I rather like children.'

'He has money of his own in his pocket, thank you, ma'am.'

'Give your poor father a kiss, and come and see him again,' said Bob Coates.

The boy had been told frequently that young people who said 'shan't' stood little chance of going to heaven, but he decided to take the risk; and Mrs. Galer, as she hurried him out to the pavement, reproved him with less decision than usual. It was raining, and she stopped to open her umbrella in order to protect the boy and his new suit; in doing so she overheard the new Mrs. Coates say, in her high, aggrieved voice, 'Well, why didn't you think of it when she was here; run after her, do, you great gawk!' and with a sudden fear in her mind she took the boy's hand and walked quickly across the broad street. Looking back she saw Bob Coates at the entrance of the waxwork show gazing up and down anxiously; he turned up his coat collar and hurried in the direction of the 'Angel.' She hastened also on her side; something seemed to tell her that if she could cross into St. John Street Road safely she would evade trouble; this was always an unlucky spot for her. The boy refused to go by a hoarding until he had received some explanation of the startling posters there, and this delayed her; she lost sight of Bob Coates because of the intervening traffic of tramcars and omnibuses. She would take care not to bring the boy up in this direction again. He must never be allowed to go out without proper escort. She could give orders that if his father called at any time, Coates should be told that the boy had gone away to the country.

'Don't lag, dear,' she said imploringly, 'we shall get so wet if we don't hurry up.'

Not safe to let him go to the school again for a

while. Well to send him down to Ballard for a while so that the statement should possess the desirable element of truth; Ballard would be good to him, and it would do the boy no harm to have a taste of village life. Children of his age did not greatly mind where they were, providing they had enough to eat; it pained her to think that he might soon forget her.

Near to the junction where City Road started its long career, and St. John Street Road went down one way and Goswell Road went off in another, and Pentonville Hill and Upper Street selected directions of their own, the rain, after deluding folk into the idea that it intended to be nothing but a shower, suddenly became frenzied, dashing down so that it spattered from the pavements; setting everybody off at a run, causing outside passengers to close umbrellas and hurry down for inside seats; awakening policemen out of their usual deliberate manner, and making them scamper in search of the rolled-up oil capes which can be left anywhere without risk of loss. Mrs. Galer and the boy returned and entered one of the entrances of the theatre, and, pressing through near to the box-office, congratulated themselves on their fortunate escape. The boy being lifted up that he might see the photographs of smiling ladies in frames, Mrs. Galer had to endeavour to inform him why they were not fully and completely apparelled; the boy, deciding for himself, said that he expected they were just going to have a wash.

'No!' She heard the voice of Bob Coates in the

crowd of people who packed the vestibule. 'I wasn't running away from my wife again, and I don't want any of your snacks. Great pity some of you can't forget and forgive.' The man to whom he was speaking made another suggestion. 'And I wasn't going to 'ave a glass on me own, neither. People can find a lot of things to say against me, but they can't say I'm unsociable. Well, leave off chipping me, that's all. I only ask to be left in peace.'

'It's all right, dear,' whispered Mrs. Galer to the boy, 'don't you get frightened. He shan't see us.'

'If you *must* know,' said Bob Coates, on the other making no further inquiry, 'if not knowing is going to keep you awake at nights, I was running after a son of mine. The wife—my present wife, I mean—she's fond of youngsters in her way, and, of course, it follows she ain't got none. So we're going to 'ave this kid to live with us and train him and bring him up properly in the way he should go.'

'Don't you cry, dear,' she whispered again. 'He shan't come near you.'

The rain ceased, and the crowd went into the open. Trembling, she hugged the boy and waited a few minutes; then she determined to venture. The boy rubbed his eyes and in his shrill voice told Mrs. Galer that he was going to be as brave as a grown-up soldier.

'Got ye!' cried Bob Coates. 'Got ye at last. And a nice row I shall get into when I get back for being so long. Come along, kiddie!'

'You're never going to take him away from me.

I won't let you take him. He's my little pet. I can't do without somebody to look after.'

'Leggo of him!'

'You shan't touch him, I'm not going to let you! Constable! Oh, it's you, sergeant. Do something to help me, there's a good man! Please!'

Sergeant Swanson listens with an air borrowed from magistrates, from judges, from Solomon.

'Sorry, Mrs. Galer,' says Sergeant Swanson, 'but if you want to act according to the law, why, there's nothing else to do.'

'What did I tell you?' asked Bob Coates triumphantly. 'Come along, kiddie, and leave off sniffing! Or else I 'll——'

CHAPTER XXI

MRS. GALER had felt sure the day would be fine, because Sidney, appearing rarely, always brought good weather with him; in this respect, as she often said, he resembled the poor old Queen. Miss Jeffrey, giving a friendly hand with the preparations, had offered prophecy of a more sombre kind, but the dressmaker was in a mood of accentuated melancholy, and for a reason. Grimsteed (once greatly desired), suspecting some falling off in respect and admiration, had startled her on a recent afternoon by calling ('I was fitting a lady customer at the time,' explained Miss Jeffrey, trembling with excitement, even in telling the story for the third time, 'but I left her just as she was to answer the knock'), by calling, and, with one foot on the sill of the front door, declaring that the engagement having now lasted a sufficient time, the moment had come to advance a stage, and give consideration to the question of marriage. Chaps had been chaffing him about it, and he had determined to have a definite answer. Miss Jeffrey fenced, urging the suddenness of the proposition, and the fact that a girl could not be expected to make up her mind in half a minute; Grimsteed replied with some plainness of speech that the word no longer described her accur-

ately, and that she had been considering the subject for years. She could either take him or leave him, but she could not do both. If she did not want him, he would go out to South Africa. Miss Jeffrey begging for time, Grimsteed had allowed a week sulkily, pointing out in precise terms that a man owed something to himself, and that he for one was determined not to become a mere target. Mrs. Galer asked the dressmaker why on earth she did not marry her minstrel boy, and Miss Jeffrey explained that after keeping single so many years she could not bear to think of a husband who would lord it over her from morn to night; on Mrs. Galer remarking that the obvious alternative seemed to be to let him go, Miss Jeffrey burst into tears, and blamed Heaven for making her attractive to the male.

Too much to do by way of preparation to give time to Miss Jeffrey's grievance. Sidney had written again to say that he thought of bringing with him a friend, and the prospect of two silk-hatted youths walking down Kimmer Street flourishing walking-sticks with an air and stopping at the private door next to the Victoria Laundry Office, where the words 'and Co.' now appeared in the space that had been reserved for 'and Son,' was a picture which made the little woman's head become dazed with satisfaction. So many things were required for the correct reception of the important visitors, that Mrs. Galer had for some days past dictated them to Janie Wills as they occurred to her mind. The serious question of cigars brought perhaps the greatest turmoil of the brain; Janie took counsel on this

point with a friend; and G 1242 told her that for all ordinary tastes those at seven to the shilling were good enough—were indeed smoked by himself when off duty and when walking with a lady—but that if Sidney's friend had been accustomed to higher refinements then it were better to go the whole hog, and get those at five to the shilling; if these did not satisfy him, said Johnnie Leadbetter authoritatively, why you might take it he was a chap who did not know a good smoke when he met one. The bottle of claret was Mrs. Galer's idea.

Do not imagine that Kimmer Street remained in ignorance of the event. The two girls, ruled by Miss Wills with an iron rule, found themselves waylaid after office-hours by matrons who, asking for opinions on the threatened trouble between Russia and Japan, brought conversation gently in the direction of home affairs, and were thereupon furnished with informative details, touched with the slight extravagance always needed by mundane affairs to render them interesting. Thus it was that, on the Sunday afternoon when the two visitors were due, Kimmer Street had despatched infants to Sunday-school at a prompt hour, and, denying itself the rest that usually came after the principal meal of the week, took up positions at windows, and, affecting to read Sunday papers, kept watchful eyes on either end of the street. Something to think that they were about to be honoured by the presence of gilded youth; from Whitehall to Buckingham Palace seemed but an easy step.

'I shall certainly remind him of the date when he

came here last,' said Janie Wills. 'Piece of cheek I call it, to treat us in this way.'

'You 'll do nothing of the kind,' replied Mrs. Galer. 'And cut that bread-and-butter thin, there 's a dear. Sidney was always fond of thin bread and butter.'

'Wonder how the friend will behave?' Mrs. Galer in reply gave a nod of confidence. 'Not that I care,' said Miss Wills proudly 'now.'

'Wasn't it thoughtful of Mr. Ballard to send that hamper?' remarked the little woman cheerfully. 'Everything something in it, too. Told you he introduced two new shop customers, didn't I?'

'You 've told me it over and over again.'

'That isn't the only sign that I 'm getting middle-aged,' said Mrs. Galer amusedly. 'When my boy comes here presently, towering 'ead and shoulders above me, I shall feel like a hundred and sixty-five.'

'Johnnie says you 're one of the few people that never will grow old. Wonder whether they 'll drive up in a hansom?'

'You may depend upon it,' said Mrs. Galer confidently, 'that my Sidney will do it in style.'

These things were happening at half-past two, and the visitors could not be expected to arrive until four. She would have greatly preferred that Sidney had brought his friend to dinner, a meal which gave scope to invention, but he had written that they would call in to take a cup of tea, and she had feared to annoy him with the alternative suggestion. Even for tea, one could do much in the way of relishes, and here were watercress, and

potted meats, and sardines, and cakes, and Swiss rolls, and (presently) hot buttered toast, to be kept warm on a hot-water jug, so that the round table had only just enough room for plates and cups and saucers. Shrimps had been considered and rejected; Janie Wills declared shrimps to be low, adding severely that she wondered Mrs. Galer did not go all the way at once and talk of winkles. Janie had read late on Saturday evening a column in her journal alleged to be written by a countess, in which a paragraph replying to one 'Winsome Winifred' gave the information that no one nowadays ever thought of sitting up at table for tea, and Janie had some thought of showing this, and thus effecting an upset of the whole arrangements, but she tactfully refrained, because she had no desire to add perplexity to Mrs. Galer's mind.

'Mind you don't call Mr. Bashford "sir," Janie. Nothing annoys my boy more than that.'

'Thank goodness,' remarked Miss Wills, 'he won't make a speech this time.'

The little woman had had her photograph taken —('Looks like vanity,' she remarked, 'but it isn't that exactly!')—by Simmons of Goswell Road, who had a great reputation as an artist, for the good reason that no crease or line, however deep and marked in the original, was ever allowed to appear in his work; critics to whom the portrait had been submitted had pointed out frankly that it made her look ten years younger, and she had replied with equal candour that there would have been no sense in paying out money simply to see

yourself as the mirror reflected. Mrs. Galer proposed to lead the conversation on and recommend to her boy that it was high time he had *his* portrait taken again; the last (upstairs in her bedroom, where it was kissed every night and morning) gave him seated on the knee of his poor father, and apparently not fully recovered from the effects of reproof or chastisement.

'I shall sit 'ere and pour out, Janie; you sit opposite me; Sidney will be there on my left, and the other young gentleman on my right, because he's the greatest stranger. *I'll* look after their cups so as to fill them up the moment they're empty; *you* look after their plates. See?'

Notable reform to be instituted in regard to management of the kettle. Instead of being allowed to sit on the fire in the sitting-room and obtrude its song into genteel conversation, it was to be placed on the gas-stove in the scullery, and do its work of boiling with modesty and reserve; the empty silver teapot to be taken from the table with a word of apology and brought back filled. Mrs. Galer, looking around in the manner of an anxious general, hoped the new cosey would have some effect; it possessed a wealth and a variety of colour that insisted on recognition. The tea-cloth belonged to Janie, and represented the young woman's first effort in the direction of making a home of her own; the next purchase, if all went well, would be two cups and two saucers. Sidney's friend had not seen the new office, and, despite Janie's earnest advice to sit down and rest for a bit, Mrs. Galer

hurried through the passage to see that everything there looked attractive to the eye. She trusted Mr. Bashford preserved an interest in business matters; it would be a great tax upon her if she had to refrain from making reference to the steam laundry. The great thing was to avoid, as far as possible, using words beginning with an aspirate.

'There they are!' cried Miss Wills excitedly.

'Don't let's open the door till they—No!' with regret, 'only a silly milk cart.'

The American clock ticked its way loudly to five o'clock and the two scarcely spoke now; an organ which owed its existence to the same enterprising country started, after a groan or two of warning, at next door but one. A barrow with a hoarse-voiced proprietor, who had to hold one side of his face in order to bawl, came down Kimmer Street; Mrs. Galer's lips moved, and her prayer was granted. Directly the voice had turned the corner there came, with no preliminary warning of wheels, a long and well-modulated series of raps at the front door. Mrs. Galer jumped from her seat.

'Stop!' said Miss Wills commandingly. '*I* answer the door; *you* go and light the gas stove.'

The little woman obeyed, straining her ears that she might miss nothing. Mrs. Galer in, asked Sidney's voice. Good! Would his companion excuse him if he entered first? Mrs. Galer remained in the scullery until the visitors had been shown in, and too much excited to wait any longer, thereupon burst into the sitting-room.

'My boy!' she cried. 'Dear me, how I 'ave wanted to see you.'

'Mother, I 've brought——'

'Why, your moustache quite hurts,' she exclaimed delightedly.

'I wish you would listen, mother. I think you have met Mrs. Bryant's sister, Miss Carthew.'

'I remember Mrs. Galer quite well,' said the tall young woman.

'You must really forgive me, I 'm so flustered. I thought Sidney was bringing—— It doesn't matter, though. Come upstairs, miss, and take off your cloak.'

'We shall only stay a few minutes, mother.'

'Nonsense!' she replied. 'Shan't let you go running off before I 've had time to look at you. Janie, I do believe I forgot to put a light to the gas-stove after all.'

'I 've done it,' said Miss Wills curtly. She turned to Sidney, who had not yet given her recognition. 'Find your eyesight giving you any trouble?' she asked.

'How are you?'

'Shan't tell you,' replied Miss Wills.

Mrs. Galer recovered herself before she reached the top of the stairs; she apologised for their awkwardness, and Miss Carthew replied that the house seemed to her to be filled with comfort. The tall girl compared her own lodgings in Chenies Street with Mrs. Galer's bedroom, and gratified the little woman by an assurance of the marked difference existing between the two, giving a special word

of approval to the eider-down quilt, which, as she observed, looked as good as new; Mrs. Galer refrained from informing her that it was a purchase of the week before. The tall girl had a quiet manner of assurance, expressing opinions and views as though any contradiction would be preposterous. With some apprehension lest she should be trespassing beyond the bounds of delicacy, Mrs. Galer asked whether Miss Carthew would care by any chance to have a peep at Sidney's own room; Miss Carthew said at once that this would interest her greatly. The gas being lighted, the two went round the room together with the mother as guide, pointing out objects of interest, such as the bookshelves which Ballard had nailed up years ago, the sloping desk in the corner bought at a sale in Pentonville Hill, the inkstand that had clipped her fancy because it pretended to be a game of cricket. And everything was kept just so, she explained in confidence, and thoroughly dusted and cleaned out regularly, so that whenever he took it into his head to come back, he could return without giving a moment's notice, and he would find it all exactly as he had left it. She was not going to bother him, because he was old enough to decide these matters for himself, but sooner or later, depend upon it, Sidney would come back to her. It stood to reason. He was bound to find out some day that landladies were imperfect, and this would make him think of her, and back he would come like a shot. Miss Carthew said Mr. Galer was fortunate in having such a room and such a mother. They went downstairs on excellent terms;

in the sitting-room the voice of Janie Wills rang out shrilly and contentiously.

'Well, it's his fault,' she explained heatedly. 'Yes, I know the kettle's on the boil, but let me tell you, Johnnie Leadbetter's as good a one as he is any day in the week, Sundays as well.'

'Quite unintentionally,' explained Sidney in his measured way, 'I seem to have given annoyance. All that I said was that one could not help smiling just now on being saluted by a full-grown constable. Or nearly full-grown.'

'There he goes again.'

'And to identify him after one had almost dismissed the incident from one's recollection as a boy I once knew.'

'If I 'd been him I 'd have taken you in charge for sneering.'

'Janie, Janie!' said Mrs. Galer reprovingly. 'See about the tea, like a dear. We shall all be more amiable after we've had a cup.'

'You scarcely require a remedy, Mrs. Galer.'

'Thanks be,' she admitted, 'I generally manage to keep fairly even-tempered. Don't get very much up and don't get very much down. Shall we say one lump for you, miss, or two?'

'Miss Carthew,' said Sidney, with an emphasis on the name, 'takes no sugar.'

'If any one,' remarked Janie Wills returning with the teapot and taking up her part as the Fairy of Discord, 'if any one is in the least inclined to stoutness they can't be too careful.'

Mrs. Galer during the progress of the meal found

herself fully occupied, when not pressing food upon the two guests and bewailing the fact that they would not eat to the point of inconvenience, in explaining away the remarks of Miss Wills. By the time cake had been handed round, that young woman was directing her shafts against the lady visitor, becoming wild in her aim because Miss Carthew declined to credit her by any sign with intimation of good shooting; sometimes wholly misunderstanding, and taking a barbed remark as having a general application, when its intention was particular. The new photograph being shown round, Sid said it was well taken, and asked who it was supposed to be, but Miss Carthew recognised the original at once. Miss Carthew singled out the rock cakes for special commendation, and when Mrs. Galer delightedly proclaimed them to be her own make, expressed polite incredulity, but gave up this attitude of unbelief on Sidney giving confirmation.

'Mother has always been a good cook,' he said.

'Before I was married——'

'I think I 'll try another,' he interrupted.

'I was in service for about a twelvemonth.' Her son reddened.

'*My* mother was housekeeper,' said Miss Carthew, 'to a family in Wimpole Street.'

'You never told me,' remarked Sidney.

'Why should I? It 's what we are that matters, not what our parents were.'

'Many worse things,' remarked Miss Wills pointedly, 'than domestic service.'

'I suppose so,' said Miss Carthew. Janie began a retort.

'Then I got tired of it,' went on Mrs. Galer, 'and thought I should like to have me evenings to meself, and I went in for the laundry. There I 've stuck ever since. Sidney's poor father—— That 's my foot you 're pressing, my boy, not Janie's. They used to be such good friends, these two,' she explained to Miss Carthew, as Janie and Sidney frowned at each other. 'Used to walk out 'and in 'and—I mean arm in arm.'

'Came across a strange affair in some old documents at the office,' remarked Sidney, to divert the conversation. 'It appears there was once an Austrian princess——'

Mrs. Galer willingly gave up her own reminiscence; as her boy gave the names glibly she held her cup midway between the saucer and her lips. On Janie asking at the end of the story whether he had been dining with many emperors lately, she shook her head correctingly and listened eagerly, proudly. Miss Wills, unaccustomed to defeat, rose and pushing her chair back to the wall, concentrated her efforts on the work of clearing the table, the better to show how small an interest she found in Sidney's anecdote; once in the scullery, she sang loudly a chorus that had no reference to the day or the circumstances.

'Tell your mother about the foreign spy who called the other day.'

'Don't think that will interest her.'

'Please do as I ask,' said Miss Carthew.

Mrs. Galer looked round quickly on noting the tone of command in the tall girl's voice, but she forgot this in the pleasure of listening again to her boy. Janie Wills lighted the candles at the pianoforte, took the portrait of Queen Victoria and the china dog from the top, banged the lid open, and let down the music rest.

'Let Sidney hear your new piece,' suggested Mrs. Galer. 'You know how fond he is of music.'

'Haven't got any exactly Sunday pieces.'

'We're not so particular as all that, Janie my dear. Fire away, and don't be shy about it.'

'Shy?' echoed Miss Wills scornfully. 'Takes more than this to make me shy.'

She dashed into the overture to 'Zampa' with zeal and strenuousness; bringing herself up short on the third page with the curt remark that that was as far as she had taken at present. Miss Carthew offered a compliment, Janie sniffed, and declared this should by no means be taken as a fair specimen of her best playing; Sidney remarked that the instrument seemed to be slightly out of tune. Would Miss Carthew play something?

'Brought your music?' asked Janie.

'Miss Carthew does not need music,' remarked Sidney.

'I see,' said the girl, 'plays by ear.'

Going to the window and finding there a small crowd of children listening, Janie Wills ordered them to disperse and make themselves scarce; returning, she excused them on the ground that it was but rarely on Sunday evenings they found

anything to make them laugh. Bells began to clang individually and gloomily for church; the American organ next door but one awoke and plunged into a fresh career of grunting melody. At the end of the street a hymn was being sung at an outdoor meeting by a few shrill voices.

'We must be going,' said Sidney.

'Not yet,' implored his mother, 'not yet. What's your 'urry? Besides, you haven't seen the improvements in the office. Janie, take a light and show him how smart we are in there.'

'Some one's going to call for me directly, to look over an empty house.'

'Allow me to carry the candle,' said Sidney.

'Thanks,' said the girl, 'it isn't heavy.'

'They've both altered,' said Mrs. Galer, left alone with Miss Carthew, 'that's the real truth of the matter. Him especially. And improved, too,' she hastened to add. 'Nobody would identify him with the little chap he was years ago. He didn't begin to grow until he was about nine and a half. Reg'lar mother's boy he was before that. The things he used to say, the things he used to do! I shall never forget his standing up on this table, and reciting "Twinkle, twinkle, little star"; it was about the only time I ever saw my poor 'usband cry when he was sober. But Sid was always a dear, good boy. Not really good, of course; he was a terrible young scamp sometimes, but it was soon over. I remember once when he was a little bit of a chap, and he thought I was going to punish him for something and I didn't, he put his arms round my neck

and he said, "You're the goodest lil' mother I ever had in all my life." But, bless my soul—where did I put my 'andkercher?—you're not interested enough in him to care to hear all this nonsense. Must you be off? I'll come up with you. Mind these awkward stairs again.' They went up. 'You'll have to have half a glass of wine before you go.'

'Mrs. Galer!' The tall girl accepted assistance with her jacket; the other stood on tiptoe. 'I want to tell you something.'

'Yes, miss.'

'Don't call me miss. I am going to take your son away.'

'If he's going in your direction——'

'He has asked me to marry him.'

Mrs. Galer sat on the side of the bed and held by the round brass knob.

'Marry him,' she repeated.

'The wedding will take place quite soon.'

'Quite soon,' she said slowly. 'Quite soon!'

He came upstairs, and in the room where he had slept so many years of night near to her, where she had nursed him and watched him and tended him; soothed him to sleep and awakened early to play with him, there he threw off the reserve that he had acquired in modern years, and, his arms around her neck, cried, 'Mother, dear, I don't forget!' Then she was alone. The little woman sat where her boy had left her, letting her mind play gently with the past, not daring to speculate on the future. Blamed herself for not having foreseen this contin-

gency, told herself that she ought to have known she would certainly lose him one day. She realised that now he had gone out of her life. At the end of the street, the group, its numbers reinforced, sang loudly and in a determined way the Doxology. She went to the chest of drawers and adjusted the mirror.

'After all,' she said, smiling at her reflection, 'after all you know there 's the business!'

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